WEIGHED IN THE BALANCE

"His will, when it is read, will surprise us."
(*Page 16.*)

WEIGHED IN THE BALANCE

BY

CHRISTIAN REID

Author of "Armine," "Carmela," "A Woman of Fortune," "The Land of the Sun," etc.

Frances C. F. Tiernan.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS U.S.OF.A.

BOSTON

MARLIER, CALLANAN, & COMPANY

1900

3169

TWO COPIES RECEIVED.
Library of Congress,
Office of the
JUN 8 - 1900
Register of Copyrights.
A. 12079
May 14, 1900

PZ3
.T444We

SECOND COPY.

62513

Copyright, 1899

BY REV. D. E. HUDSON, C. S. C.

Copyright, 1900

BY MARLIER, CALLANAN, & CO.

CONTENTS

BOOK I

PAGE

EXPECTANT HEIRS 1

BOOK II

DWELLERS IN BOHEMIA 55

BOOK III

THE WINGS OF EROS 128

BOOK IV

THE AWAKENING OF PSYCHE 336

BOOK V

THE BALANCE IS HELD 447

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

"HIS WILL, WHEN IT IS READ, WILL SURPRISE US" *Frontispiece*

FACING PAGE

"SUDDENLY COURAGE CAME TO NORBERT" 80

"IT PLEASED HER THAT HER FATHER'S GENIUS SHOULD BE RECOGNIZED" 188

"THE QUIET, RESTRAINED TONES CEASED, BUT IRMA DID NOT ANSWER" 334

"THAT A MAN SHOULD SELL HIS HONOR AND HIS CONSCIENCE" 438

Weighed in the Balance

BOOK I

EXPECTANT HEIRS

I

"SO you think, doctor, that there is no hope of his recovery?" said Gerard Hastings, meditatively.

The words were a statement rather than a question, but it was as a question that Dr. Warner answered them:

"Of his recovery, certainly not. He can never again be even partially a well man; but he has such wonderful vitality that he may pass through the present crisis and rally once more — or he may not. Frankly, the chances are against him."

"And if he should rally, the change will take place — ?"

"Within twelve hours. I will return at eight o'clock, and bring Dr. Lacy with me. Until that time the nurse has my directions, and no change of any kind is likely to occur."

"There is no immediate danger of death?"

"None, I think," the doctor answered, drawing on his gloves and preparing to descend the steps of the portico on which the two men were standing.

"Nevertheless," he added, turning around, "if Mr. Darracote has any friends whom he might wish to see, it would be well to let them know that his condition is critical."

"Is Mr. Darracote himself aware of his condition?" Hastings asked.

"I have not informed him of it," replied the doctor, who agreed with many of his profession in thinking it no part of a physician's duty to tell his patients unpleasant truths, especially the most unpleasant truth of all.

Then he entered his carriage, and taking a notebook from his pocket, was deep in its contents before his servant, who drove at a sharp pace, had reached the broad iron gates which opened on the road beyond.

Not a street. The city in its rapid strides had not yet reached thus far, though its tumultuous life was near at hand. But its most fashionable thoroughfare stretched into an avenue which for miles was lined on either side with beautiful country-houses. Not many of these were visible from the road. The stranger who was whirled along behind a pair of fast horses, saw little beside one green park after another, full of bosky depths of shade.

"There is the Heron place," some good-natured cicerone would say. "Charming grounds, don't you think so? That lovely little cottage of which you catch a glimpse half hidden in trees is a purely bachelor den; belongs to Mr. Hastings, — and is in exquisite taste within and without. And here is Argyle, the Darracote place. I wish you could see the house. It used to be shown to visitors, but that was while the owner was away. Now that he is at

home no one is admitted. He is said to be in wretched health — likely to die very soon, and nobody knows to whom his property will go."

At the entrance of this house Gerard Hastings still stood after the doctor's carriage had passed from sight.

He was a man of thirty-two or three, with an air of unusual distinction, and the ease of manner and bearing which comes from the consciousness of assured social position and long familiarity with the best social life. His well-knit figure was at once muscular and graceful, the contours of his face were all finely cut, the chin strong and firm, the mouth slightly sarcastic, and the whole countenance lighted by a pair of cool, handsome gray eyes.

He remained motionless so long, apparently rapt in thought, that a lady who had been for some time watching him from one of the windows at last came out to his side. She was a woman whose years were little less than his own, but who bore them so well that she looked much younger. A fair complexion — purest milk and roses once, and still remarkably lovely, considering how soon such roses fade; fair hair in great abundance; eyes neither green nor yellow nor brown, but a mingling of all these tints; delicate features, and a figure full, yet not lacking grace, made up a whole so attractive that few people thought of disputing Mrs. Treherne's beauty. Certainly no one had disputed it when she burst upon society in the first freshness of her youth. Women had envied, and men raved over her; she was a reigning belle, a star of the first magnitude.

And at that time the man who stood before her now had fluttered around her as one of her admir-

ers, — the one whom for many reasons she liked best of all, for Hastings had even then the reputation of being exceptionally attractive to women. But although flattered and spoiled, he declined to exchange his golden liberty for the bondage of matrimony. Heiresses did not tempt him, beauties attracted him, but he possessed the usual accompaniment of a susceptible fancy — a fickle disposition; so the brightest eyes shone in vain for him. He fluttered round Eleanor Lucas for a time, won as much of a heart as she had to give, then calmly said good-bye one day and sailed for Europe.

Even women of the world suffer heartaches now and then, but they know how to hide them. No shade of dimness came over Miss Lucas' beauty, and in less than two weeks she was engaged to Ogden Treherne, the most eligible of her suitors. He was young, madly in love with her; and though his own fortune was not great, he was heir to the large estate of a childless uncle. Under these circumstances, every one agreed that the match was a good one; and the marriage took place in due time, with the approval of all concerned.

According to the nature of things, happiness should have followed; and perhaps with Treherne it did follow, for a short time. But before very long it became clearly evident to him that if his beautiful wife possessed a heart at all, that heart was not his. Following this knowledge came fierce jealousy of the men who still thronged around her; for adulation and flattery were necessary to her as food and air. She resented in no measured manner interference with her favorite amusement, and so matters went

from bad to worse. There was a strain of dissipated lawlessness in the Treherne blood which was always ready to come to the surface, and it broke forth violently with Ogden. People began to pity his wife, others condemned her; stories of terrible quarrels were told, — affairs came to a crisis when she refused absolutely to live any longer with her husband.

Treherne, on his part, made no effort to induce her to do so. "We have probably each had enough of the other," he said grimly. "Well, I 'll try to make her a widow as soon as possible, since a married flirt has not a very enviable position in the world."

The miserable, reckless young fellow kept his word better, perhaps, than he intended. He died soon from the effects of excessive dissipation; and, as if to add to the enormity of this conduct, his death took place six months before that of his uncle; so the estate passed to other heirs, and his wife's prospects ended in one of those slender provisions which people describe as "a small competence," but which was not at all competent to fill her wants.

Fortunately, the aunt who brought her out in society (she was early left an orphan) had been the wife of Mr. Darracote, a man of great wealth. Mrs. Darracote died soon after the marriage which resulted so disastrously, but her husband was deeply attached to her, and when Mrs. Treherne asked his protection, he could not refuse it, though approving of her course and of herself as little as possible.

"I will give you a home as long as you need it, for the sake of your aunt," he said; "but you need expect no more from me."

Understanding that he was a man who meant exactly what he said, it is probable that Mrs. Treherne did not expect any more — for some time. A stately, luxurious home like Argyle was a very pleasant abiding-place to a young and beautiful widow with the world before her; but presently other hopes crept in. Why should not Argyle be hers when its present owner, already ill with a hopeless disease, had been gathered to his fathers? Where would Mr. Darracote, a childless man with no near relations, find a better heir than herself? Her heart beat high with desire and hope as she asked these questions. She could not play ministering angel to Mr. Darracote; for, being of somewhat irritable temper as well as of eccentric disposition, he would tolerate near him only servants trained to the observance of his "ways;" but she was mistress of his house, and he could not fail to see that she adorned the position as if born for it. Others beside himself thought of these things, and her chances began to be reckoned high by the outside world, when — Gerard Hastings came home.

A simple fact, this, to all appearances, but one that changed the current of speculation greatly. Hastings, besides being the son of Mr. Darracote's oldest friend, was himself a special favorite with that gentleman, and had been his ward. After years of foreign life and travel, he returned, even more handsome, more accomplished, and more fascinating than when he went abroad. It was shrewdly suspected that he had spent nearly the whole of his patrimony; but what of that? With or without a

fortune, he was a social magnate of the first rank; and if the Darracote estate should pass into his possession, society was prepared to exalt him on its highest pedestal and fall down and glorify him.

What Mrs. Treherne thought of such a formidable rival, in the person of her old admirer, could only be conjectured; for she carried neither her heart nor mind on her sleeve. They met with easy cordiality; and nothing in their intercourse ever betrayed the secret thoughts of either. If Hastings entertained any hope that Mr. Darracote would make him his heir, he gave no sign of the anxiety which usually attends such a state of expectation. The grounds of his own home — the pretty cottage already alluded to as "a purely bachelor den" — adjoined those of Argyle. It had been his custom all his life, when at home, to lounge over some time in the course of the day to spend a short time with his old friend and former guardian. What he had always done, he did now, neither more nor less. If spending a short time with Mr. Darracote also meant, as a general rule, seeing Mrs. Treherne, why should he object to that? She was still an exceedingly handsome woman; and he liked, he had always liked, handsome women. He knew what his old power over her had been (men are not prone to underestimate facts of this kind); and he tested matters just far enough to ascertain that he could assert that power again if he chose to do so — if in any manner it became worth his while to do so.

Mrs. Treherne, for her part, was not deficient in sharp wit, and she read the situation clearly.

"If I win the fortune, I shall win him also," she

said to herself. "If *he* wins it, I must go out into the world and find another Ogden Treherne."

So matters had stood for several months; and so they still stood on the afternoon when Mr. Darracote's malady had reached a critical stage, and Dr. Warner drove away from the door of Argyle, leaving Hastings standing there.

He had not heard the step which approached his side, so he started when Mrs. Treherne spoke.

"I suppose Dr. Warner has told you that Mr. Darracote is dangerously ill?" she said.

"Yes," Hastings replied. "But he also said there is still hope of his rallying again. And since that is the case, I am doubtful what to do."

"To do!" repeated Mrs. Treherne, in a slightly startled tone. "To do — with regard to what?"

"With regard to telling him of his danger," Hastings said quietly. "He has known for some time that he is hopelessly ill, and hardly more than a week ago he exacted a promise from me that I would let him know whenever the doctor declared that death was near at hand."

"Why does he wish to know?" she asked. "Has he not made his will?"

At this involuntary betrayal of what was in her mind, Hastings smiled.

"I cannot answer that question," he said. "There is nothing of which I know less than of Mr. Darracote's testamentary arrangements. He made the request without any explanation of his reason for doing so; and I promised that he should know the truth. The doubt which disturbs me now is whether or not the time has come for fulfilling that promise."

It was a doubt which Mrs. Treherne could not help him to solve. Like himself, she was absolutely ignorant of Mr. Darracote's testamentary arrangements or intentions, but she could not view this request in any other light than as connected with them. Everything which she most valued or for which she most hoped in life, hung on a dying man's caprice; and to influence that caprice was utterly beyond her power. Only one thing she knew — if he died intestate, the great inheritance would go neither to Hastings nor to herself. In neither of their veins did one drop of Darracote blood flow. Hence nothing would be gained by hindering him from making a will.

Thoughts like this passed swiftly through her mind as she stood with her eyes fastened absently on the velvet lawn that sloped away into the shadowy woods of the surrounding park. It was a fair scene with the golden beauty of the low-slanting sun upon it; but she was not heeding its fairness, not even to think of the contrast it presented to that darkened chamber where its owner lay racked by cruel pain. At last she turned to Hastings.

"You don't care for my opinion, I suppose," she said, "but if I were in your place, I would tell him the truth. To wait until the doctor says he is dying — doctors are very slow to say such things — may be to wait too long."

As she spoke a servant — a tall, slender colored man — came, with the quiet tread of a well-trained domestic, through the hall and out on the portico.

"If you please, Mr. Hastings," he said, "my master wishes to see you."

Hastings turned quickly.

"Ah, Jasper!" he said. "How is Mr. Darracote now?"

"A little easier, sir," Jasper answered, "but very weak. As soon as he heard that the doctor was gone, he told me to ask you to come to him."

Hastings and Mrs. Treherne exchanged a glance.

"Very well," the former said. "I 'll go immediately."

II

HE entered the hall, passed upstairs, and was quietly ushered into Mr. Darracote's chamber by Jasper, who whispered as he opened the door:

"Take care, if you please, sir, not to make any noise."

The caution was not uttered without reason; for Hastings found the chamber so dark that he might readily have come in contact with a piece of furniture or tripped over a rug, little as he was given to such acts of awkwardness. With extreme care he managed to thread his way, without any misadventure, to the side of the richly carved bedstead, on which — propped by large pillows into a half-sitting posture — a gaunt, emaciated man lay, breathing with difficulty, his wasted hands resting before him on the coverlet.

He opened his eyes as Hastings gently touched the hands, saying, in a voice of concern:

"I am deeply grieved, my dear Mr. Darracote, to see that you are suffering so much."

"Ah, Gerard! is it you?" he said faintly. "Suf-

fering! Yes, I have been in agony; but I am somewhat easier now. Sit down."

Hastings sank into a chair placed beside the bed, and for a minute there was silence; while a nurse came forward, gave the sick man a few drops of medicine, and then withdrew into an adjoining room. When she disappeared, Mr. Darracote spoke again:

"Does Warner think I can weather this, Gerard? I asked him the question, but he evaded it. Perhaps he told the truth to you."

"He told me that your situation is critical and dangerous, but not hopeless," Hastings answered.

"'Critical and dangerous!'" repeated Mr. Darracote. "With a man of my age and my disease, that *means* hopeless. I think that the end is near."

Looking at the face before him, noting the exhausted pulse and painful breath, Hastings thought so, too; but the absolute truth is seldom spoken even to the hopelessly ill, therefore he said:

"You cannot judge of your own condition, and Dr. Warner does not think that you are in immediate danger. But he will return in an hour or two, bringing Dr. Lacy with him; and then —"

He stopped; for, notwithstanding the patient's prostrated condition, a familiar and unmistakable gleam of anger came into his eyes.

"Warner did not tell me that he would bring another physician," he said. "Who gave him permission to do so?"

"Mrs. Treherne, I believe."

"And what right had Mrs. Treherne to be consulted in such a matter?" asked the sick man, sternly.

"I am not yet *in articulo mortis;* and if I were, what is Mrs. Treherne but a guest in my house?" He paused a moment, struggled for breath, and presently went on in a more labored tone. "I sent for you partly to ask what Warner said, partly to put a question about *her.* I have no time for preliminaries, so it is plainly this: Do you intend to marry her?"

"Good Heavens, sir! why should you imagine such a thing?" asked Hastings, more startled than he would have liked to acknowledge; since to entertain certain vague plans dependent on future events was one thing, and to be called upon to define his intentions in this summary manner quite another.

"I don't imagine it," responded Mr. Darracote, irritably. "I can hardly think that you are such a fool. But there is no telling. I do not ask the question without a reason, and I shall be glad if you will answer it."

It is probable that no man called upon to answer such a question ever found himself in a more embarrassing dilemma than Hastings. It was impossible to say, "I will marry her if you leave your fortune to her; otherwise I shall not." And since it was impossible to say this, what was the best thing (for his own interest) to reply? He had only a few seconds to consider the matter; for he felt that hesitation might rouse Mr. Darracote's suspicion. Trusting, therefore, to impulse, he said:

"I have no intention of the kind. Mrs. Treherne is not a woman whom I could ever desire to make my wife."

"She is a woman who would wreck the life of

any man who did make her his wife," said Mr. Darracote. There was another pause, and then he added faintly: "I have one or two things to say, but I can talk no more now. What time will Warner be back?"

"At eight o'clock."

"Then send a messenger and tell Kirby to be here at half-past eight. Let the doctors say what they will, I know that I cannot last much longer, and I have some instructions to give Kirby."

He motioned toward the door as he spoke, and Hastings left the room, much more disturbed in mind than when he entered it. Had he done well or ill for himself? Impossible to say; impossible even to imagine. Only one thing was certain, — Kirby was Mr. Darracote's lawyer; and the instructions for which he was to come were, no doubt, instructions with regard to that last will and testament concerning which the dying man had ever been so reticent.

"To whom will it go?" Hastings thought, as he walked out of the stately house and looked over the wide beauty of the grounds. "Perhaps we are all astray in our conjectures. Perhaps, like some other eccentric rich men, he will found a college or a hospital. But why did he ask me if I intended to marry Mrs. Treherne?"

This was a question far more easily asked than answered; for though he had asked it many times, he had not once answered it to his satisfaction, when, two hours later, he found himself in the drawing-room with Mrs. Treherne, while the two physicians had gone to Mr. Darracote's chamber. Probably

because he had in a manner renounced her, she had never since the long past day when she was Eleanor Lucas, appeared so attractive to him as she appeared this evening. Of her beauty there could be no question, and she was a woman who knew how to heighten and adorn it to the best advantage. Suppressed excitement, perhaps, had a share in lending brilliance to her; at least her eyes were gleaming like jewels, and on her cheeks was a flush like the heart of a rose.

Dressed perfectly, she made a very charming picture as she sat in a deep chair near one of the open windows. The rich room stretched on one side in dim perspective; on the other, beyond curtains lightly swaying with the breeze, stars were shining out of an evening sky, flowers were giving forth their fragrance, and there was the soft murmur of falling water from a fountain on the lawn. Ease, luxury, beauty — surely there was never any one whom these things seemed more appropriately to surround; and as Hastings looked at her, he asked himself if he had ever seen a woman more capable of satisfying his taste. That he did not import his heart into the affair was not surprising. The woman who jarred least on his fastidiousness had become the woman whom he preferred; and if at this moment Mr. Darracote's question had been asked again, he might have given a different answer.

Yet he was not concerned about the answer which he had given, for, whatever effect it might have on Mrs. Treherne's prospects, he felt a comfortable assurance that it would not influence his own. If, by a chance which was hardly credible, the dying

man should leave the fortune to her, Hastings knew his power over her too well not to know that he could exert it to any extent he pleased. If, on the other hand, — and this he thought extremely probable, — Mr. Darracote should leave it to *him*, he could ask Eleanor Treherne to share it, if he chose to do so. Of the probability of yet another disposition of it he thought little. Mr. Darracote had never evinced any tendency to indulge in philanthropic vagaries; and besides Mrs. Treherne and himself, there were no apparent aspirants for the fortune which hung trembling in the balance.

"The doctors are paying a long visit," said Mrs. Treherne, breaking a pause, in which they heard the plaintive note of a whippoorwill in the recesses of the park. "Poor Uncle Darracote! It seems hard to be obliged to leave this charming place and go — who knows where?"

"I thought it had been pretty well settled by this time that one is to go nowhere," answered Hastings, carelessly. "But that does not make leaving the good things of life any easier. Did I tell you, by the by, that Mr. Darracote has sent for his lawyer?"

She glanced at him sharply, but did not change her attitude, nor cease to wave back and forth the fan which enabled her to display so well a hand and wrist of unsurpassed beauty. "No, you did not tell me," she said. "When did he do so?"

"When I told him Dr. Warner's opinion of his condition. He thinks himself that the end is very near, and he sent at once for Kirby, desiring him to be here at half-past eight."

"I suppose it is useless to ask if he told you anything of his intentions?"

"It is useless, simply because he told me nothing. Believe me, I know no more than yourself of Mr. Darracote's intentions, nor have I ever made the least effort to know anything with regard to them."

"He has kept his counsel remarkably well," she said thoughtfully. "I fancy few men fail to give some clue to their probable intentions, but he has given none; and I think" — here she glanced again at the face before her — "that, no matter what our speculations may have been, his will, when it is read, will surprise us."

"Nothing is more likely," Hastings calmly replied. "He is an eccentric man, and eccentricity is betrayed in nothing so much as in last wills and testaments. Ah, here come the doctors now!"

The two physicians entered as he spoke, walking slowly, and speaking together gravely. Like all of their profession, they were well accustomed to reading death-warrants; but the words which they would have uttered with little heed over Brown, Jones, or Robinson required a certain decorum and formality when pronounced upon Mr. Darracote.

Still, the sentence was spoken with sufficient plainness. They would do all in their power to alleviate the suffering of the patient, and they could not say in how long or how short a time death might ensue; but even partial rallying was out of the question. Life might be prolonged for a day or two, but might again be measured only by a few hours.

"Have you told Mr. Darracote this?" asked Hastings.

Dr. Warner replied in the affirmative.

"Mr. Darracote's mind was never clearer than at present," he said. "He desired to know the exact truth, and with Dr. Lacy's opinion supporting my own, I felt that I had no right to withhold it from him. I therefore told him what I have told you, and he asked if his lawyer had arrived."

Hastings glanced at a clock the hands of which were pointing to half-past eight.

"He will be here soon," he answered; and as he spoke a servant at the door announced:

"Mr. Kirby."

III

THE lawyer who followed closely on the announcement of his name, was a keen-faced, middle-aged man, who wore an expression of extreme gravity as he advanced into the room, — not only because such an expression was proper and decorous under the circumstances, but also because he sincerely regretted to part with an old friend and good client.

"I am truly sorry to learn that Mr. Darracote is so ill," he said, turning to Dr. Warner after his general greetings were over. "Is there no hope?"

"None, I regret to say," Dr. Warner answered. "Such serious symptoms have appeared that the end is, I am afraid, close at hand. His mind is clear, however, and he is at present free from pain; therefore I advise you to see him as soon as possible."

"Let Mr. Darracote know that Mr. Kirby is here," said Mrs. Treherne to the servant, still standing at the door.

An interval of a few minutes followed in which the doctors repeated their professional statements in detail, and Mr. Kirby listened gravely. Then the servant reappearing said that Mr. Darracote would see the lawyer at once, and the medical men took their departure, — Dr. Warner promising to return in a few hours.

Left again alone together, Mrs. Treherne and Hastings fell into silence, which each found difficulty in breaking; for within the last few minutes the consciousness of tension, of crisis, in the situation had greatly increased.

The verdict of the doctors, the appearance of the lawyer, were realizing signs that the end was at hand for the master of so much wealth, the joyless owner of so much luxury; and, in a limited sense, for them also. To Mrs. Treherne it would be the end of sheltered ease, of a position in which she had delighted at the head of a stately establishment; and to Hastings the end of uncertainty, and perhaps also of hope. It is probable that he had never acknowledged to himself how much he hoped until now that he found himself contemplating possible disappointment. Nothing is more common than such unconscious self-deception. But there comes at last a moment when it is shattered, and when, with a startled surprise, we are face to face with the knowledge that we *have* hoped and that we *do* care for some good which we are on the point of losing. So Hastings, leaning back in his chair and gazing abstractedly out into the

soft obscurity of the summer night, was facing the possibility of a disappointment which he knew now would be far greater than he had anticipated, when Mrs. Treherne's voice — a voice which although musical always conveyed to a sensitive ear a suggestion of insincerity — broke the silence.

"It seems very strange," she observed meditatively, "that we know so little about Uncle Darracote's family connections. He must have some: nobody is absolutely without relations."

"Certainly not a rich man," Hastings agreed. "One may occasionally hear of a poor man in that fortunate condition."

"How can you be so cynical?" said she, reproachfully. "But he really must have some, you know; and, that being the case, however he leaves his fortune, we shall be sure to hear of them. Cousins to the tenth degree assert themselves when a childless rich man dies."

"However Mr. Darracote leaves his fortune, I think we may trust him, who was always the shrewdest of business men, and Mr. Kirby, the most cautious of lawyers, to guard against any possibility of breaking his will," Hastings answered. "But are you not taking too much for granted in speaking of Mr. Darracote as 'childless'?"

She opened her eyes widely.

"What do you mean? I thought there was nothing more certain than that he was childless."

"On the contrary, it comes to me as a half-forgotten memory that I have heard my father — who was his oldest and perhaps his only intimate friend — speak of a marriage before his marriage with your

aunt, and of a daughter who ran away with an actor and was never forgiven."

"Good Heavens! Why, in that case he may have any number of direct heirs! And you have known such a thing all these years and never mentioned it!"

"Why should I have mentioned it? Gossip is not much in my line, and certainly the matter concerned no one but Mr. Darracote himself."

"It will very much concern any one to whom he may leave his fortune."

"Perhaps. But, as I have remarked, we may trust him to employ every legal safeguard for his will. Besides, it also occurs to me that I have heard that the daughter in question is dead."

"And left no children?"

"Of that I know nothing. But I consider such a fact highly improbable; for we know Mr. Darracote as a just man, and it is not likely that he would carry resentment of his daughter's disobedience so far as to refuse to acknowledge and care for her children had she left any."

"Still, it is possible —"

"Oh! yes, anything is *possible*, even the most uncharacteristic things, as a little knowledge of the world speedily assures one. But in this case it is not probable."

Mrs. Treherne remained silent for a moment, staring at him with eyes still widely distended with astonishment; then she threw herself back in her chair with a rather harsh laugh.

"After all, why should I be surprised? There are hidden chapters in every life. And how does it

matter to me? I am not likely to be his heir. If he leaves me a few thousands to help me along in life, it will be as much as I can expect. And yet" — she drew in her breath sharply — "it is the unexpected which happens. I am such a fool that I say that to myself."

Hastings looked at her from under half-drooped lids.

"I will imitate your candor," he said. "You are no more of a fool than I am, and to both of us, I fancy, it is indeed the unexpected which will happen."

She made a quick dissenting gesture.

"You know well that your chances are good — that there are none better."

"That is where you are likely to be mistaken," he answered coolly. "Think what an old amusement it is of rich men to foster hopes, in order to give themselves at last the exquisite pleasure of disappointing them. Probably Mr. Darracote has been long engaged in perfecting plans to found and endow a Darracote School of the Liberal Arts, or something else of the kind, while smiling cynically to himself at the hopes he has now and again, by a chance word, excited in me. I have only the consolation that I never allowed him to perceive these hopes. But he knew human nature too well not to divine their existence. Of that I am certain."

"I think you are mistaken," said Mrs. Treherne. "I have heard him speak many times of your indifference to money. And I am sure that if he has any affection for any one on earth it is for you."

"Granted," replied Hastings. "And yet he may disappoint me."

"Of course," she assented, "that is always possible."

And so silence fell again between them, this man and woman steeped to the lips in worldliness, and so clearly cognizant each of the other's position, the other's thoughts. To neither did the deep pathos of the situation, so far as it concerned the dying man, appeal in the least. Frank materialists in belief as well as in practice, although neither had ever taken the trouble to formulate this belief, they gave not a thought to the soul so soon to go forth upon its last journey, unshriven and unprepared; nor did they bestow even a passing emotion of pity on the sadness of a death-bed bereft of all human affection. Doctors, nurses, and expectant heirs, — these were gathered about the dying man; but of hearts to know a pang, of eyes to shed a tear, of lips to utter a prayer, there were none. No pauper, breathing his last in the charity ward of a hospital, was ever more poor in such respect than this owner of millions in his luxurious home.

And yet it was only according to the law of an inevitable justice that these millions stood between him and other human hearts in death, as they had stood in life. As his own heart had hardened in the process of amassing them, and as he had suffered them to form a barrier, instead of a connecting link, between himself and his fellow-men, so were they now first in the thoughts of all who surrounded him, and who might else have given him at least a sentiment of compassion in this his hour of extremest need. "*Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of iniquity!*" How deeply wise the counsel, only those

know who have seen death-beds where there were no such friends; where the dying man's wealth had bought for him no blessing of the poor, no gratitude of the distressed, no mourning from hearts which bounty had relieved or kindness touched. And among all the pitiable things of life there is none more deserving of infinite pity than a death-bed like this.

The silence which had fallen in the drawing-room was only in keeping with the wider silence which brooded over the spacious house in all its parts. It was almost possible to fancy that it had been set wide open and hushed into stillness for the entrance of the Angel of Death; and that one who listened closely might hear the rustle of his wings, stirring the deep silence as he entered and passed on his way to do the bidding of God.

Suddenly the sharp sound of the door-bell rang through the house, breaking the stillness; and Mrs. Treherne started.

"How inexcusable!" she exclaimed. "I told Ellis to keep one of the men at the door to prevent anything of that kind. Such negligence is unpardonable! But servants—"

Hastings lifted his hand for silence.

"Who can be speaking in such a tone!" he said.

It was an eager, insistent voice, which could be heard speaking excitedly, urging some point with energy and persistence, and broken only by pauses which were filled with a servant's low-pitched replies.

Mrs. Treherne and Hastings looked at each other as they listened.

"Can it be that one of the unknown relatives has already arrived?" said the former.

Hastings smiled; but before he could answer the servant presented himself at the drawing-room door.

"If you please, Mr. Hastings," he said, "there is some one here who insists on seeing Mr. Darracote, although I 've told him it 's impossible. He won't go away; he says he must see *somebody*, so I thought perhaps you 'd speak to him."

Hastings glanced at Mrs. Treherne.

"With your permission," he said, "I will see who this persistent person is."

He rose as he spoke, and went into the hall, where a small, spare man, with a thin, deeply wrinkled face, the skin of which was the color of parchment and out of which looked a pair of eager, pathetic brown eyes, came forward to meet him.

"Mr. Hastings!" he cried. "It has been a long time since you saw me, and perhaps you have forgotten me. Wilkins is my name — Peter Wilkins."

Hastings extended his hand with the graceful cordiality which had in his life won for him many friends.

"I remember you well, Mr. Wilkins," he answered, "although it has been many years since we met. You are still in Mr. Darracote's employ?"

"Still in the house, sir, — the oldest clerk in it at the present time. I fancied there would have been a change for me before long. Mr. Darracote intimated something of the kind the last time I saw him; but if any change comes now, it will not be of the sort I expected. Is it true, sir," — his voice sank, — "that Mr. Darracote is dying?"

"I regret to say that it is true," replied Hastings.

"The doctors have just been in consultation over his case, and they give no hope."

"Is he — is he conscious?" the old clerk asked eagerly.

"Perfectly conscious at present; but, of course we do not know how long this state will last."

"Then, Mr. Hastings, I beg you to let me see him. Don't deny me, sir, — don't! I will not remain long; I will not say more than a few words to him; but it is most important — most necessary. I *must* see him before he dies!"

"Mr. Wilkins," said Hastings, gravely, "do you think it likely that Mr. Darracote's friends will permit him to be disturbed on his death-bed by any personal appeal — "

"Good Heavens, sir!" interrupted Wilkins. "Do you suppose that I wish to make any appeal to Mr. Darracote for myself? If that were the case, I should deserve to be kicked out of doors. No! What I wish to say to him — what I *must* say to him — is on behalf of — is with regard to a matter in which personally I have no concern. But it concerns Mr. Darracote so deeply that I should not be justified in the sight of either God or man if I failed to go to him. Don't take the responsibility of refusing me admittance to him, Mr. Hastings; for it will be a greater responsibility than you can guess."

Hastings, looking at the deeply agitated face of the speaker, recognized unmistakable sincerity. Many conjectures passed through his mind, but he did not give utterance to any of them. He only said, with a quietness which was in marked contrast to the vehemence of the other:

"It really does not depend upon me to refuse or to grant your request. Mr. Darracote's physician —"

"Is he here?"

"Not now. But when he returns I will inquire if it is possible to grant your request."

The old man made a gesture of despair which would not have misbecome a tragic actor.

"And while we are waiting for the doctor," he said, "death may not wait. Mr. Hastings, if I tell you the circumstances of the case I am sure you will acknowledge that there should be no delay —"

"Stop!" said Hastings, quickly. "Tell me nothing more than this: does the matter concern Mr. Darracote himself as well as the person or persons on whose behalf you are here?"

"It concerns Mr. Darracote more vitally than anything else on earth could concern him," was the solemn reply.

"Then I will take the responsibility of asking Mr. Darracote if he wishes to see you. But even for this you must wait. His lawyer is with him now —"

"His lawyer!" ejaculated Wilkins. He seized the other's arm and shook it violently. "Man," he cried, "I tell you there is no time to lose! Unless I see him, and see him quickly, hopeless injustice will be done. Come! — let us go to him at once. Come!"

Releasing himself with decision, Hastings in his turn took, with a firm grasp, the arm of the excited man, and led him across the hall and into the library, — a rich and beautiful room, full of the association of its owner for those who knew him well and were accustomed to see him there.

"Sit down, Mr. Wilkins," he said with the utmost

composure. "I have promised to do what I can for you, but you must wait the proper opportunity. There is, I believe, no immediate danger of death for Mr. Darracote; and we certainly do not wish to hasten the end by any ill-advised shock. Calm yourself; I will order a glass of wine for you," — he rang the bell, — "and I will leave you for a short time, in the hope that when I come back I shall find you able to see Mr. Darracote, should he consent to see you, without incurring the danger of exciting him by your appearance and manner."

The old clerk looked up out of the chair in which he had been placed, with a pleading expression in his pathetic eyes. He was making a strong effort to control himself, although his hands were shaking visibly.

"I will, sir, — I will calm myself," he said. "Don't be afraid to let me see him. So much depends on it — so much!"

"I will do the best I can for you," Hastings answered.

And then he left the room.

IV

AT the door Hastings met the servant whom his touch of the bell had summoned, and gave the order for a glass of wine for Mr. Wilkins; after which he hesitated, not knowing what to do with himself. He had no inclination to return to the drawing-room and run the gauntlet of Mrs. Treherne's questions; and less inclination, perhaps,

because he had no satisfactory explanation of his conduct to offer. Why had he not sent the old clerk away, with the simple announcement that Mr. Darracote's condition rendered it impossible for any one to see him? Why had he listened to his entreaties and pledged himself to try to fulfil his unreasonable request? And — crowning mystery, as he knew it would be in Mrs. Treherne's estimation — why had he refused to listen to the explanation of his strange insistence which Wilkins wished to give?

Since he could not answer these questions to himself, further than by saying that a strange impulse had possessed him, that the passionate urgency and evident distress of the old man had wrought upon him to a point of unusual self-forgetfulness, and that some sudden instinct had risen up to forbid a knowledge of matters which did not concern him, he knew that it would be vain to attempt to answer them any more satisfactorily to Mrs. Treherne. Therefore he turned his back on the drawing-room and walked to the staircase, deciding that he would go up and wait for the lawyer's departure to see Mr. Darracote and make an effort, at least, to keep his word to the old clerk in the library.

Absorbed in these thoughts, he mounted the easy, shallow steps without lifting his eyes; and so started with surprise when on a broad landing where the staircase divided and a graceful statue stood bearing a lamp, he found himself facing Mr. Kirby.

"I was coming for you, Mr. Hastings," said the lawyer, gravely. "Mr. Darracote wishes to see you."

Hastings glanced at him keenly.

"Does he wish me to sign anything?" he asked.

"No," the other replied. "All that is over. Mr. Darracote's will has been long made, — he is not a man to leave such a matter to the hour of death, — and he only wanted to add a comparatively unimportant codicil. This has been signed and witnessed. Afterward he asked for you. So I said that I would send you. You cannot go to him too soon. He is failing rapidly."

They parted without further words, one proceeding downward, the other upward. Gaining the second floor, Hastings passed quickly to the chamber where he had been in the afternoon. Jasper, who was sitting beside the door, rose to open it for him. The face of this faithful servant was the only one in the house which bore a sign of grief. He had served the dying man all his life, — ever since in his youth he had followed him from his early Southern home, — and there was honest sorrow in his heart for the ending of their long association.

"Mr. Hastings, what do the doctors say?" he asked in a whisper, as he stood with his hand on the door-knob.

"They say there is no hope, Jasper," Hastings answered, with a sympathetic glance; for it suddenly occurred to him that here was the only mourner at this death-bed.

"Do they — think he 's going fast?" Jasper asked again, his voice breaking.

"Very fast, I fear," Hastings replied. "They do not think he will last long; so don't detain me, my poor fellow, — he has sent for me."

Jasper instantly opened the door, and Hastings entered the sick-chamber, which was now lighted with the soft glow of a shaded lamp. Again he made his way, this time without difficulty, to the side of the bed where Mr. Darracote, still supported by many pillows to a half-sitting position, lay.

It seemed to Hastings, as his glance fell on him, that the signs of impending dissolution were more evident on the countenance than they had been in the afternoon. For an instant he feared that the fatal stupor of death had set in, so lifeless looked the face, sunk forward with closed eyes until the chin touched the breast. But the nurse, at whom he glanced with quick interrogation, shook her head.

"He is conscious," she murmured. And indeed there was immediate proof of this fact; for at the sound of her whisper the sick man opened his eyes and met the gaze fastened on him with one so keen and intelligent that it was evident the spark of life had once more flickered up brightly.

"You have come quickly, Gerard," he said — and the voice seemed to the listener stronger than it had been a few hours before. "I was afraid you might have left the house."

"I shall not leave the house while there is the least probability of your wanting me," Hastings answered.

The sick man nodded slightly.

"That is well," he said. "I shall not want you long; but for the present I am glad you are here. I have something of importance to say to you. Nurse, oblige me by going into the next room and closing the door."

The nurse rose, paused a moment to feel his pulse and give him a powerful heart stimulant, and then complied with his request. After she had retired, Mr. Darracote looked at Hastings, who had seated himself beside the bed.

"I want to speak to you of my will," he went on. "I want to explain it."

"I am ready to listen to whatever you wish to say," Hastings replied, with the calmness and air of close yet unhurried attention which are so soothing to the sick and suffering.

"I am afraid you will be disappointed, Gerard," Mr. Darracote said wistfully. "I have thought of making you my heir; and, honestly, it would have given me pleasure to do so, — more pleasure than any other disposition which I could have made of my property. But it did not seem to me as if it were a pleasure which I could allow myself. I had an old debt to pay, — a debt of early kindness and assistance. Some men forget these debts, but I have never done so; though perhaps I am late in paying mine. Long ago, when I was a fatherless lad, I had an uncle who gave me my education and start in life. It is to his son — the only other Darracote beside myself of whom I know — that I have left the bulk of my estate. He must be an incapable person, for he is some kind of an artist and he has never made his way in the world. But there 's self-respecting stuff in him; for, although he knew of the old indebtedness as well as I, he has never asked help from me. No doubt, he thought that I should have offered it. Well, I give it now — full measure."

He paused, and Hastings made an effort to speak. He was astonished at a sensation as if his tongue were dry and his lips stiff. He thought that he had reckoned upon disappointment; now, however, that the disappointment came, he found, like many another man, that he was not really prepared for it at all.

"My dear Mr. Darracote," he said at last, "you have always showed me great kindness, for which, I assure you, I am grateful; but I have never considered that this kindness gave me any claim upon your fortune. You must not think that any explanation of your intentions with regard to it is due to me."

"But I *do* think so," replied Mr. Darracote, with astonishing energy. "There is an explanation due to you. The world has thought you likely to be my heir, and you must, to some extent, have shared the belief. I hesitated long, I wanted to leave it to you; for I have felt toward you, Gerard, as if you were the son whom God has denied me."

It is to be hoped that it is recorded to Gerard Hastings' credit, in a book where only selfless acts are placed, that he put out his hand here and laid it with an affectionate pressure on that from which he could hope for no more favors.

"Let me repeat," he said quietly, "that I am very grateful for your affection; and when I have added that I understand why you have made this disposition of your property, I don't know that there is more to be said on the subject."

"Yes, yes!" answered the dying man, feverishly. "There is much more — don't interrupt me! It was

a relief to my mind when you assured me that you have no idea of marrying Mrs. Treherne. I have another plan for you. I have inquired — I have learned that my cousin, Gilbert Darracote, has a daughter; and I hope that, if she suits your taste, you will marry her. I have set my heart on this. I meant to have them here and arrange it myself, but — now — you see I never shall."

"It was very kind of you to plan for me in such a manner," said Hastings, who, however, at that moment felt a sudden emotion of anything rather than gratitude; "but you know things like this must, to some extent, arrange themselves; and so — "

"Don't interrupt me!" said Mr. Darracote again. "What you may or may not do after I am gone I cannot help, but I want to make you understand what I have had in view in what *I* have done. My hope, then, has been that you will marry this girl, who is her father's only child; and when they come here, it will depend upon yourself whether or not you do so. What I have left you — for, of course, I have to a certain extent taken care of your future — has no condition attached to it. It will make you rich enough to approach with perfect independence any woman, no matter how rich she may be. Don't thank me, but remember I only ask in return that you will, *if possible*, marry this girl. Promise me that you will take the matter into consideration."

"I promise so much, certainly," said Hastings; "and also that, in considering it, I shall remember your wishes, which will have the greatest weight with me."

"And I have dictated a letter to my cousin telling him my wishes; so I can do no more. I should be glad to think that all I have will eventually pass into your hands. There is — no one else."

What was it that suddenly brought into Hastings' mind the recollection of the old clerk in the library below, of his excitement, his agitation, his words, "Unless I see him, and see him quickly, hopeless injustice will be done"? Had such injustice already been done? And if so, to whom? He hesitated a moment. Dared he bring such agitation in contact with this man so near his end? And yet could he take the responsibility of being silent — break his word to the eager creature waiting for him? He acted again on impulse. He leaned forward over the sick man, in whose wasted face the brilliant eyes shone with strange effect.

"Mr. Darracote," he said, "there is a man below — Peter Wilkins is his name — who seems very anxious to see you, — so anxious, indeed, that I promised to let you know of his presence. You can tell whether or not there is any reason why you should see him."

"Peter Wilkins!" repeated Mr. Darracote. He frowned. "I know why he comes," he said. "But how does he dare — Tell him, no! Certainly I will not see him."

Hastings touched a bell beside the bed, and Jasper appeared.

"Go down to the library," said Hastings, "and tell the person whom you will find there that Mr. Darracote cannot see him. Make him understand that this is final."

"And see that he leaves the house," said his master, sharply.

"Yes, sir," answered Jasper, glancing from one face to the other; and then he noiselessly withdrew.

"Wilkins!" repeated the dying man, as if to himself; and he began to open and shut his hands nervously. "How often have I forbidden him to address me on this subject! And yet he ventures to come here — to my house! Perhaps he thinks that because I am on my death-bed I am also in my dotage. And — yet — yet — there may be a bare chance that he has some new information. Gerard, I — I think that I must see him for a moment — just for a moment."

"I am afraid that he will excite you too much, Mr. Darracote," said Hastings, doubtfully. "It will be wiser to wait until the doctor comes — "

"The doctor!" Mr. Darracote raised himself on his pillows with the strange strength which excitement lends to weakness. "Do you suppose I shall ask permission of the doctor as to what I can do or not do, especially since he has read my death-warrant!" he cried. "Go down and bring that old fool up here. One glance at his face will tell me if it is the same story — or another. Go!"

"My dear Mr. Darracote, let me beg — "

A thin hand lifted, a bony finger pointed to the door; and, in a voice which no one connected with him had ever disobeyed, Mr. Darracote repeated:

"Go!"

V

HASTINGS did not obey the imperative command too soon. When he went down he found Jasper in the act of attending Peter Wilkins to the hall-door. The old clerk was making no protest: apparently he had recognized the futility of anything of the kind; but, with a crestfallen air, his gray head bent and his hat in his hands, was submitting to be shown out of the house. His spare figure was already passing over the threshold when Hastings called quickly:

"Mr. Wilkins!"

He turned, his face lighting up with hope when he saw who addressed him. Without giving him time to speak, Hastings went on:

"Mr. Darracote has changed his mind. He will see you for a few minutes. You are to go up to him at once. But remember that you must not excite him. Whatever you have to say must be said very briefly and very quietly. Don't forget this."

"I shall not forget it," the old man answered eagerly. "Thank you, Mr. Hastings, — thank you a thousand times. God will reward you, sir."

"It is not *I* whom you should thank," said Hastings. "Mr. Darracote at first refused, and then decided that he would see you. Jasper, show Mr. Wilkins up."

"To Mr. Darracote's room, sir?" Jasper asked, hardly crediting his ears, in which his master's last emphatic words were still ringing.

"To Mr. Darracote's room," Hastings answered.

He stood for an instant watching the two figures as they passed up the staircase, a speculating wonder in his mind with regard to the nature of the business which induced Mr. Darracote to consent to receive the old clerk. Then, turning sharply around, he found himself facing Mrs. Treherne.

She had heard his voice when he called Wilkins, and from the drawing-room had seen the latter sent up to Mr. Darracote's chamber. It was not surprising, therefore, that both curiosity and offence were plainly visible on her countenance.

"I think, Mr. Hastings," she said stiffly, "that, unless I am of no importance in this house, you might have let *me* know something of this person whom you have allowed to see Mr. Darracote."

"I beg pardon," Hastings replied. "I have not allowed the person to see Mr. Darracote. He has gone up, as you probably heard me say to him, by Mr. Darracote's own permission."

"But how was it that his request should have been taken to Mr. Darracote?"

"For so much I am accountable. As you know, I was called out to some one who insisted on seeing Mr. Darracote —"

"And you never returned to tell me who it was!"

"Because just after I had taken the man in question — who is, by the by, an old clerk of Mr. Darracote's named Peter Wilkins — into the library, and left him there, I met Mr. Kirby, who told me that Mr. Darracote wished to speak with me."

"Ah!" she ejaculated, drawing in her breath sharply.

"Of course I went to him immediately. He talked to me a little, explaining some of his wishes —"

"To his heir! Let me congratulate you," she interrupted, with a sudden access of color in her cheeks and a painful smile about her lips.

"Your congratulations are premature," said Hastings, coldly. "I am not his heir. So much I may tell you, without violating confidence. Well, the few words he desired to say having been spoken, I remembered that I had promised Wilkins to ask if Mr. Darracote would see him. Mr. Darracote refused to do so, and Jasper was sent to convey the refusal to the old man. But hardly had the servant gone when Mr. Darracote changed his mind, decided that he *would* see him, and insisted on my going down and sending him up. *Voilà tout!*"

There was a moment's silence. With brows drawn into a frown, Mrs. Treherne gazed at the speaker. His reticence, of which she was very conscious, provoked her beyond measure; but she knew him too well to hope to draw from him anything more than he chose to tell. Questioning was useless, yet how refrain from expressing something of the exasperation and curiosity which surged within her?

"It is a very singular story," she said; "and I am sure you don't expect me to believe that there is no more in it than you have told. But what I may or may not believe is of no importance. I quite understand that."

"I am sorry you think so," Hastings answered, somewhat too carelessly for much effect. "How-

ever, I have told you all that I know — all that there is to tell."

"But it is absurd!" she burst out. "Why should this man insist on seeing Mr. Darracote? And why should Mr. Darracote, who has not seen his oldest friends for weeks, consent to see *him?*"

Her listener shrugged his shoulders.

"Incredible as it may appear to you," he said, "those are questions which I find myself unable to answer. Neither Mr. Wilkins nor Mr. Darracote took me into his confidence."

"You certainly asked the man what he wanted of Mr. Darracote?"

"Again, incredible as it may seem to you, I did not."

"But he must have represented his business as being of the most urgent importance, to induce you to mention him to Mr. Darracote at such a time."

"I have a weakness for keeping my word, unless the consequences involved are too serious," Hastings replied. "I had promised the old fellow to mention him to Mr. Darracote, and that was the sole reason why I did so."

"I consider that you acted like a — in a very foolish manner," said Mrs. Treherne, her exasperation increasing with her distinct appreciation of a subtle mockery in the tone and manner of this man, who had a power to move her possessed by no other. "You don't know what distressing or exciting intelligence he may bear; and in permitting him to see Mr. Darracote you have certainly assumed a great responsibility."

Hastings felt that the words were, in a degree at

least, uncomfortably true. He had probably acted imprudently in mentioning the old clerk and his request to Mr. Darracote, and he had beyond doubt incurred a responsibility. But to acknowledge this to himself was one thing and to be arraigned as a culprit by Mrs. Treherne was quite another. To the latter, at least, he had no disposition to submit.

"I beg to disagree with your view of my responsibility," he said. "I acted upon my own judgment, because, in the absence of the doctor, there was no one whom I could consult before letting Mr. Darracote know that a man who had been long in his employ and might therefore be supposed to have some knowledge of his affairs, wished to see him on a matter which he stated to be of vital importance."

"Of vital importance!" repeated Mrs. Treherne, pouncing upon the admission. "So it seems that you *do* know something of his business! But, of course, it is useless to inquire what this vitally important matter was."

"It is useless, because I know nothing more than I have said," Hastings replied. He drew out his cigar-case. "To spare your asking any more questions which I have no means of answering, I will go for a stroll and a smoke outside," he said. "I shall return a little later."

He turned, and, taking up his hat, passed out through the open hall-door, leaving a deeply angered woman behind him.

She remained motionless where he left her, gazing after him, with the frown deepening on her fair forehead and her hands clinching in the strong impulse of her anger. It was an anger which had a

deeper cause than the immediate offence of his disdainful speech. It went back and comprehended all the past as well as the present, — the past in which he had trifled with her in a manner no woman ever forgets or forgives, and the present in which he had stepped between her and the favor of the rich man who could have done so much for her. He might declare that he was not the heir of Mr. Darracote's wealth; but instinct assured her of two things: first, that the dying man would not have spoken confidentially of his bequests to one who was excluded from them; and, secondly, that to her no part of the fortune had come which made it worth Gerard Hastings' while to pay her the respect of even ordinary deference. This she told herself as, standing alone, in the rich spaciousness of the lofty hall, she shivered from head to foot with impotent passion.

"If I could but *hurt* him!" she said to herself. "I would be willing to do anything if I could accomplish that at last. If I might pay off the long score, — if I might hurt him and disappoint him as he has hurt and disappointed me!"

"Mrs. Treherne!"

She started and turned abruptly. Jasper, in his felt slippers, had come noiselessly down the staircase and stood beside her, an expression of great concern on his face.

"Jasper!" she exclaimed. "What is it? Is your master worse?"

"He does n't seem worse," Jasper answered; "but I 'm afraid he 's exciting himself too much. He 's been talking to the old gentleman who went up;

and now he wants Mr. Hastings, and I 'm to go for Mr. Kirby."

"For Mr. Kirby!" In sudden excitement, Mrs. Treherne seized the servant's arm. "He must want to make another will!" she cried breathlessly. "What has that man been saying to him? Jasper, you must have heard!"

Jasper looked at her with wonder, and also with something of scorn.

"I did n't hear anything, ma'am," he said. "Can you tell me where Mr. Hastings is? My master wants him at once."

"Mr. Hastings left the house; no doubt he has gone home," Mrs. Treherne answered, resuming with an effort her composure of manner and speech. "I will send a messenger for him, but *you* must n't wait. Go to the stable, get a light trap, and drive into the city for Mr. Kirby. If he is not at home, go to his club — go anywhere, but don't fail to find and bring him."

"It 's not likely that I 'll fail to bring him if he 's above ground," Jasper returned, with a shade of offence in his tone. Who was Mrs. Treherne that she should give orders to *him?* This was the thought in his mind, as, straightening his shoulders, he walked away toward the rear of the house.

And yet it did not occur to him to disregard that part of her order which related to Hastings. It was obvious that he could not spend time in going to the cottage if the more important errand to the lawyer was to be done. Another messenger would serve as well for the former purpose, and why should he have suspected that there was any danger of such a mes-

senger not being sent? Still less could he have suspected that Hastings was at the moment not more than a hundred yards distant, smoking his cigar on the lawn and keeping an eye upon the entrance of the house, that he might see when the old clerk emerged. For he had decided that he would walk with him to the gates, learn in what condition he had left Mr. Darracote, and perhaps obtain some knowledge of the nature of the business which had gained for him an interview that, as Mrs. Treherne truly remarked, had been denied many more important persons.

This decision taken, he had then, to a certain extent, put aside the thought of Peter Wilkins; for, however mysterious his business might be, it could not, save as a matter of curiosity, concern him, Gerard Hastings, who now at last knew with certainty Mr. Darracote's intentions toward himself. That those intentions had surprised him, and that they now occupied his thoughts very much to the exclusion of everything else, was not remarkable. The knowledge that the man, in whom he had never imagined a trace of sentiment, had been engaged in match-making schemes for his benefit was one of those strange illuminations which we sometimes unexpectedly receive upon the characters of those whom we fancy we know best. He smiled as he thought of it, pacing to and fro in the starlit darkness; and then other thoughts, light and vague as the wreaths of smoke floating from the cigar between his lips, filled his mind. He had promised, absolutely pledged himself, to consider marriage — marriage to which year by year he had grown more

averse — with a woman of whose existence he had been ignorant an hour before! Could anything be more incredible than this?

And yet the pledge was sufficiently indefinite to amuse rather than annoy him. Consider! That was all he was asked to do. The girl would come; he would cast his critical glance upon her, give the weight he had promised to Mr. Darracote's wishes — and to her fortune; then advance or withdraw, as he chose; his own independence in either case fully assured. It was an interesting situation, even for a *blasé* man, — this which Mr. Darracote had so kindly created for him; and, meditating upon all which it might involve, it is not surprising that he forgot the lapse of time, forgot to wonder why Peter Wilkins — strictly warned that his interview with Mr. Darracote could last only a few minutes — delayed his departure so long.

Meanwhile Jasper's tidings had left Mrs. Treherne quivering in every nerve with excitement, — eager, curious, certain of only one thing: that by no act of hers should Hastings be again summoned to Mr. Darracote's bedside. In forming this resolution she had no definite hope of inflicting any serious injury upon him. It was simply a relief to her exasperated feelings: a retaliation for the manner in which he had turned his back upon her and walked out of the house. He had chosen to send Peter Wilkins up to Mr. Darracote's chamber without consulting her; now she would see that *he* was not consulted regarding the grave consequences which seemed likely to flow from that interview. And if these consequences should affect his interests

injuriously, why, then, she would only the more readily seize any opportunity of forwarding them.

One opportunity at least she was determined to seize, — that of meeting Peter Wilkins. Her knowledge of Mr. Darracote's character told her that he would dismiss the old man as soon as he had extracted from him whatever information he possessed or was the bearer of; so, throwing herself into a chair, she sat with her eyes fastened upon the staircase, in an attitude of motionless yet alert expectancy. And the man for whom she waited was not long in appearing. Jasper had not been gone many minutes when down the brilliantly lighted staircase came the small, spare, shabbily dressed figure of the old clerk. He advanced hastily, with an apprehensive look in his eyes, which increased when he saw the startling vision of the lady who rose to confront him.

"I am afraid," she said, as he paused with a nervous bow, "that you must have left Mr. Darracote somewhat excited, Mr. — ah — Watkins."

"Perhaps a little, madam," answered Peter Wilkins. "But I hope the excitement will do him no harm. And I am grateful that I have had the opportunity of seeing him."

"It is an opportunity which, in my opinion, should not have been allowed," said Mrs. Treherne, severely, "unless the matter upon which you wished to see him was of the very greatest importance."

The old clerk looked at her steadily.

"It was a matter of the very greatest importance," he replied. "Otherwise I should never have intruded — never have ventured to ask to see him."

"I suppose you know that the doctors have given up all hope of his recovery?"

Peter Wilkins bent his head.

"I grieve to know it," he answered sadly. "But even on his death-bed a man should be ready to do justice."

"Justice!" she echoed sharply. "Justice to whom? I am nearly related to Mr. Darracote, and have a right to know with what matter you have been troubling him."

"It is likely that you will know very soon," Wilkins said. "But it is not my place to tell you. Mr. Darracote himself will no doubt do that."

"You know well that Mr. Darracote is a dying man," she cried; "that he is not able to tell anything. I *insist* upon knowing what your business with him has been."

The old man glanced around, as if seeking some means of escape.

"Excuse me!" he said; "but I am looking for Mr. Hastings. Mr. Darracote has asked for him."

"Mr. Hastings is not here; he has gone home," said Mrs. Treherne. "What is wanted with him?"

Wilkins made a deprecating motion.

"Mr. Darracote wishes to see him," he said. "I know nothing more. But he is very anxious, and perhaps I had better return to tell him —"

"There is not the least necessity for that," she interrupted peremptorily. "I will send a servant for Mr. Hastings. As for yourself — you are returning to the city?"

"At once," was the reply, in a tone of relief. "Thank God, I have accomplished what I came for!

And the rest is with *him.* I have nothing more to do with it. I am glad to go home."

Mrs. Treherne regarded him silently for a moment, measured, as it were, her strength with his; and saw that, old, frail, shabby as he was, he was too strong in the possession of that inner force of resistance which we call firmness, obstinacy, strength of will, for her to hope for success in any further attempt to wrest his secret from him. Then she suddenly perceived the next best thing to do.

"Have you a carriage?" she asked. "No? In that case it is a pity you had not been a little earlier, and you might have driven in with the servant who has gone for Mr. Kirby. Perhaps even yet it is not too late — he may not have started. I will inquire."

She rang a bell, although Wilkins made another deprecating gesture.

"It does not matter," he said. "You are very kind to think of it, but I have to walk only about a mile from the gates to reach one of the street railways."

"If you must walk, there is a shorter path from the back of the house to the outskirts of the city," she said. "And if Jasper is gone, you can save yourself much fatigue by taking that. Has Jasper gone?" she asked, turning quickly to a servant who presented himself.

The man professed complete ignorance on the subject, — knew nothing of Jasper, was not aware that he was going anywhere.

"Take this — gentleman to the stables," said Mrs. Treherne. "If Jasper has not gone, tell him to

take Mr. Watkins with him into the city. If he *has* gone, show Mr. Watkins the path which leads by a short cut to Boundary Avenue."

"You are very kind, madam," said the old clerk, much surprised by this unexpected consideration. "I am exceedingly obliged to you."

"Not at all!" replied Mrs. Treherne, with more truth than usually accompanies this form of words. "Don't delay or Jasper will be gone. Good-night!"

She watched him conducted away in an exactly contrary direction to that in which he would be likely to encounter Hastings; and as he disappeared she turned and went quickly upstairs.

VI

THE nurse looked up with a distinct air of relief when Mrs. Treherne entered the sick-chamber.

"I am glad to see a member of the family," she said, in a low tone, as the latter reached her. "Mr. Darracote is very much excited, and anxious for—"

"Gerard!—where is Gerard?" the sick man cried impatiently. "I sent for Mr. Hastings. Where is he?"

"I am sorry to say that he is not in the house, Uncle Darracote," Mrs. Treherne replied, approaching the bedside. "He went away as soon as he came downstairs."

"Went away!—after promising that he would stay as long as there was any possibility of my wanting him! Why did he go away?"

"I suppose he thought you were not likely to want him again. What is it you require? Will not *I* do?"

"*You!*" He gave her a glance of mingled irritation and contempt. "No! I have no use for *you!* I want Gerard, and I cannot understand his going away. Have you sent for him?"

If she hesitated, the hesitation was imperceptible.

"Yes," she replied, as clearly as if the words had been the truth instead of a falsehood.

"Then he 'll be here soon. He won't delay when he knows that I want him," said Mr. Darracote. "You should have told the servant not to loiter. If he went quickly, Gerard ought to be here in a few minutes —"

"Meanwhile, I wish so much that there was anything I could do!" repeated Mrs. Treherne, in a tone of the most affectionate solicitude. "I am afraid that person whom Mr. Hastings allowed to see you has worried you — done you harm —"

"Mr. Hastings did not allow that person to see me. *I* allowed him — I sent for him!" the sick man retorted. Contradiction seemed to afford relief to his irritability; and even at a less trying time those insincere tones would have irritated him. Then he closed his eyes and remained silent, his wasted face standing out in sharp relief against the white pillows which supported his head; his breast rising and falling with short, irregular breathings; his fingers interlacing in a manner which indicated the great nervous tension he was enduring.

Mrs. Treherne glanced at the nurse and lifted her eyebrows interrogatively. The nurse shook her head significantly.

"It is a pity Mr. Hastings went away," she murmured. "This anxiety, this waiting, will do him more harm than anything else."

"Yes, it *is* a pity," said Mrs. Treherne.

She looked back as she spoke at the death-like face on the pillows. It *was* a pity, from his point of view and Mr. Darracote's, that he had gone away; but it was no concern of hers. The pathetic picture of the dying man, vainly endeavoring to restrain the impatience which he knew was shortening his minutes, already so briefly measured, — listening, with every faculty strained, for the familiar footstep, — did not affect her in the least. Her heart was hardened against both, — against him who had ungraciously given her the shelter of his roof but denied her any share of his wealth; and against the favorite, the fortunate one, who had so scornfully put her aside as of no account. Let him learn now of how much account she was! She thought with absolute pleasure that he was loitering idly in the starlight, enjoying his cigar perhaps in some spot within easy call, did she only choose to open the window overlooking the lawn and call to him.

Mr. Darracote unclosed his glittering eyes again and looked at the nurse.

"It is strange that he does n't come," he said. "That messenger must have delayed. Go and send another. Tell him to make haste — to lose no time — to bid Mr. Hastings come to me *at once!*"

The nurse glanced at Mrs. Treherne. She felt averse to leaving her patient.

"I had better ring for a servant and send the message," she whispered, her hand moving toward the bell.

But Mrs. Treherne stayed it. She could not afterward tell under what instinct she acted; but, whatever it was, it had the force of an inspiration.

"Go!" she whispered in reply. "We must humor him. I fancy this is only an excuse to send you out of the room. You can see that he has something on his mind which is troubling him exceedingly. If I am alone with him he may speak of it, and that will be a relief, — will occupy his attention until Mr. Hastings comes. So go; and after you have sent the messenger it will be well for you to wait in my room, just across the corridor from this, until I call you. I am *sure* he wants to speak to me."

"What are you whispering about?" demanded the invalid, angrily. "It is not necessary to discuss my orders. Nurse, oblige me by doing as I request. Go and send a messenger for Mr. Hastings."

Mrs. Treherne gave a little nod and the nurse left the room. She was extremely reluctant to do so, for her practised eye perceived that the sick man was in a very dangerous condition; but to refuse to obey both his request and that of the mistress of the house was impossible.

She was no sooner gone than it became evident that Mr. Darracote had indeed desired to be relieved of the restraint of her presence, her deterring watchfulness. To Mrs. Treherne's great surprise, he immediately summoned her nearer to him by an imperative gesture.

"Raise me higher!" he said in a faint whisper. "Now put some more pillows behind me. I — I have something that I must do. I wanted Gerard to help me, but he is not here, — I never thought he

would have gone away like this. I dare not wait for Kirby — if he comes it is well, and he can do it in right form; but I — I must do it myself in some form, for fear he may not come in time. Give me pen and paper — quick!"

"O Uncle Darracote!" Mrs. Treherne gasped, — startled, frightened, and now almost disposed to regret the duplicity which left her here alone with one who presented an awful picture of determined will struggling with the mortal weakness of approaching dissolution. Never would she forget that sunken face, with its glittering eyes, so wild and so compelling. "You are not able to write!" she cried. "You must not attempt such an exertion, — the doctor would not allow it."

Mr. Darracote fixed his glance on her with a terrible frown.

"You are not a fool," he exclaimed, "whatever else you may be! Do as I tell you. There are pen and paper on that desk — bring them here!"

It was impossible to disobey him. The sovereign power of the mind, absolutely unclouded, and the dominating force of the character asserted themselves, despite the body's weakness, in this hour of death, as they had asserted themselves throughout his life; gaining his desire for him now, as they had gained every other object on which he had ever set the masterful strength of purpose which marked him out among men.

Mrs. Treherne brought from the open desk, where Mr. Kirby had drawn up the codicil of the will, a blotter on which lay a sheet of paper and a fountain-pen. Mr. Darracote seized the pen; and, while she

held the blotter steady on his knees, began to write. What writing it was! Hieroglyphics rather than characters, which straggled in crooked lines across the white page; but the man who was putting the very last energy of his life into this effort paid no heed to the possible illegibility of what he produced. On he wrote, panting presently from exhaustion, as one who running a race finds his strength leaving him before the end is reached. Great drops of sweat stood out upon his brow; his shaking hand could hardly form a letter; but still he persevered, still he wrote, until the page was nearly full of the scrawling, irregular writing. Then he suddenly paused and looked up into the pale face of the woman beside him.

"Now I am going to sign it," he said hoarsely. "If you are ever called upon, you can testify that you saw me do it — that I wrote it all with my own hand."

She made an inarticulate murmur of assent; for by this time consternation had too entirely taken possession of her to admit of speech. What did it all mean? What was he doing? As one fascinated, her eyes followed the trembling hand as it made for the last time the familiar signature — "Richard Darracote." The next instant the pen dropped from the fingers, the head fell forward on the breast, the eyes closed, — the strength which the imperious will had commanded for its service failed the moment that service was done.

Mrs. Treherne did not cry out or ring the bell, or do anything else which an agitated woman in such a situation would have done. Quiet self-possession

and a sense of perfect command of the situation instantly came to her. She drew the paper from under the nerveless hand which had fallen on it, and deliberately read it from beginning to end.

Five minutes later the nurse, waiting in the room across the corridor, heard herself sharply called, and hastened at once to the sick-chamber. Mrs. Treherne, attempting to support an unconscious man, looked at her with a very frightened expression.

"He asked me to raise him, nurse," she cried. "He wanted to be ready for some exertion when — when Mr. Hastings came. But as I lifted him he fainted."

The nurse came up to the side of the bed, and, taking the insensible figure in her capable arms, laid it back on the pillows. A strange calm and dignity had settled on the sunken face which a few moments before had been so full of stress and pain. She felt the pulse, she put her ear to the heart, she listened for the breath that would never stir the pale lips again. Then she looked at Mrs. Treherne, and from her to Hastings, who at that instant hurriedly entered the room.

"Mr. Darracote has not fainted," she said gravely. "He is dead!"

It was even so. In the very act of repairing injustice the soul had passed to the bar of the great and final Justice.

BOOK II

DWELLERS IN BOHEMIA

I

"OH, the roses, Margherita! — I *must* have a few roses!"

"*Eh, poveretta!* I know how you love them. But see! — there are only two francs in my purse, and the vegetables for dinner yet to buy."

The first speaker drew a deep breath, such as a child draws when some eagerly coveted pleasure is denied it, and looked wistfully at the fragrant masses of crimson, pink, and golden roses that covered the florist's stall before which she had paused. Then, shaking her head with a little gesture of renunciation as the vender held up a glowing cluster, she walked on by the side of her companion.

They presented a great contrast as they passed together along the shaded street of the ancient town of Passy, now a suburb of Paris. The coveter of the roses was a tall slender girl with an extraordinary erectness and grace of figure and a face of striking beauty, dark, delicate, brilliant, full of possibilities of joy and sorrow, — a type such as artists appreciate and adore and the rest of the world admires without always appreciating. It was an Italian head, with all the picturesqueness of the South, with masses of

black curling hair breaking into little rings and tendrils like a dusky halo about the ivory-tinted brow and cheeks, and with something so singularly sweet in the dark, liquid eyes that to see the countenance even in a passing glance was to feel the spell of its fascination.

The woman who walked beside this charming creature was even more Italian in aspect, yet as prosaic as she was poetical; a woman of the peasant class, short, broad, with a strong-featured, swarthy face, on which honesty, fidelity, and affection were as plainly to be read as on the countenance of a noble dog. That she had the defects as well as the virtues of her class and temperament those who came in contact with her in certain relations soon discovered, — chiefly fellow-servants, with whom she never agreed, and tradesmen whom she screwed down to the last penny. Even her master saw at times the flash of a hot temper; but to the girl at her side, the motherless child of her dead young mistress, she had never been anything but most devoted and most faithful as nurse, companion, and friend.

While they walked on, the girl continued speaking, — her language the sweet Tuscan tongue in which the two always talked.

"If I am ever rich," she declared, "I will have quantities of flowers, — flowers all the time, flowers everywhere, — you may be sure of that, Margherita."

"And why not if you like?" replied Margherita. "It will not be flowers only, but many other things that you can have when you are rich, Signorina Irma, for rich you will surely be some day."

Irma Darracote smiled.

"It is pleasant to hear you prophesy with so much assurance," she said; "but I really don't see that there is the faintest prospect of anything of the kind. And, except that I might smother myself in roses, I should not care about it; while papa would not care at all. He thinks it almost a crime to have a great deal of money when there are so many people that have none."

Margherita sniffed.

"The signor might change his mind if he were tried," she said dryly. "We are all given what is best for us, and only the blessed saints have a right to throw away the gifts of the good God."

The girl smiled again.

"He is not likely to be tried," she said. "And I am not likely to have all the roses I want so long as vegetables must be bought, — see, Margherita, there is some fine lettuce, such as you need for your salad!"

The lettuce and some other vegetables were, after much chaffering, added to the contents of the basket on Margherita's arm. Then the two turned homeward; for, although the summer morning yet held some freshness, there was a promise of intense heat in the haze which overhung the hills beyond the Seine on one side and the great mass of Paris on the other.

Passing by many walled lawns and gardens, at the open gates of which now and again white-capped servants stood conversing with friends or neighbors, they presently reached a very quiet street, hardly, indeed, more than a bowery lane, lined chiefly by walls bounding the rear of the grounds of large villas, and came finally to a rambling, old-fashioned house, a relic of the days when Paris had been miles distant

from this pleasant country village lying amidst its trees. Some of these trees grew tall and stately on the small, neglected lawn before the house; and about the whole place there was a semi-rural air, an absolute absence of pretension, a cheerful shabbiness as far removed from squalor as from any suggestion of luxury, which seemed to indicate that it belonged to the mythical yet very real and widely differing region of Bohemia.

A gate in the green wall of enclosure stood partly open; and, muttering something, not of a complimentary nature, about the *facteur*, Margherita closed it carefully after they entered. Then she followed her young mistress to the house, where they separated, — one going to the kitchen, the other passing along the hall, which ran through the dwelling, to an addition made in the rear, — evidently, from its form and skylight, an artist's studio.

Opening the door of this without ceremony, she entered a long, bare room, more like a workshop than the studios to which modern eyes are accustomed. But that it was a studio in the true sense a number of clay models and casts, together with sculptor's work of various kinds and in various stages of progress, attested. Ornaments there were none, unless a number of charcoal studies pinned on the walls could be so considered. And of beauty, abstract beauty, in the work exhibited, there was very little. Force, strength, fidelity to nature, there was much; but hardly a suggestion of the antique grace, the antique harmony and repose, which to express was once held to be the chief end of art. A glance would have told the veriest stranger that everything here was the work

of one of the modern reactionists against ancient ideals and standards.

With a solitary exception; for in the centre of the room, near the model's platform, stood an unfinished study in clay, — a nymph-like figure of exquisite grace. Light, delicately radiant and joyous, it appeared to rest upon the earth not from the compulsion of matter but from pure choice, as if the arching, springing feet might leave it at any instant and follow the butterfly which was in the act of fluttering upward from the extended hand. There was no need of this butterfly to say that the nymph was Psyche, loveliest of heathen myths; for the poetic beauty, the virginal grace, the ineffable joyousness, could belong to no other. It was Psyche, — eternal type of the human soul before love has taught and suffering tamed it.

And standing before the figure, regarding it with a critical air, was its creator, — a tall man in working blouse, pipe in mouth, and a black velvet cap on a striking head. At sound of the opening door he turned, showing a face which, though not handsome in the ordinary sense of the term, was full of character and interest; for the great sculptors, Time and Thought, had been at work, chiselling into harmony much that was irregular and even rugged until the forceful countenance had become attractive in the highest degree. It was a face which a painter would have loved to put upon his canvas with deep Rembrandt tints: the strong features, the sun-tanned skin, the gray curling hair and full gray beard; while deep-set, under overhanging brows, were the dreamer's eyes of clear, limpid blue, — such eyes as are never seen except in the face of a little child, or

one who has kept the heart of a child amid all the disillusions of life.

"Am I late, papa?" the girl inquired quickly — and now she spoke in English. "I hope you have not been waiting for me. Shall I give you a sitting?"

"Not this morning, I think, my dear," the sculptor answered. "I do not feel much in the humor for work. I have just been considering this figure. I am afraid it is entirely too pretty."

"For *me*, papa?"

"Oh, no — not for you! As a matter of fact, it is not so pretty as you are. But for art."

She laughed.

"But, you know, you always preach that art must represent nature, no matter how ugly it may be; why, then, should it not represent nature when it is — well, pretty?"

"Because prettiness in art is an abhorrent thing. How often must I tell you that to represent beauty is not the end of art, — that it is beneath true art, which must seize and represent *character?*"

"And why may not character have a beautiful expression? You admire it when you find it in reality, why not admire it in art?"

"In art it is generally weak, trivial, unworthy of representation."

"But the Greeks, papa — "

He put out his hand and pinched her ear.

"There, there! — spare me the Greeks. I see how it is. You are in love with your likeness here. And I confess" — he regarded it with a tenderness which seemed to triumph over disapproval — "it *is* a charming thing of its kind. One doesn't often

succeed in expressing exactly what one wished to express. What I wanted to embody was the conception of the soul, — not a modern conception, but that of the ancients: the conception of a free, joyous, untamed thing: Psyche before she knew Eros. And, as far as one can judge of one's own work, I feel that I have succeeded — thanks to you, my dear!"

"Am I really like that, papa? Haven't you idealized me?"

"Not in the least. It is doubly yourself, because you have not only served as a model for the statue, but you gave me the suggestion. There you see yourself as you are now — and as you will never be again after the tyrant of human life has laid his hand upon you."

The voice had a slightly sad inflection, for all its lightness, as he uttered the last words; and the girl's sensitive ear catching it, she remained silent for a moment, gazing at the lovely grace of the creation before her — the nymph with head upturned toward the sky, with outstretched arms, with fluttering drapery and springing feet, as if in the act of seeking something beyond the earth. Presently she spoke:

"And if this is Psyche before she knew Eros, how would you represent her afterward?"

The sculptor took a handful of clay from a moist heap near the statue and began to work a little about the drapery.

"The Greeks have told you," he said after a moment. "You know how she is represented — harnessed to his car."

It might have been Psyche herself — before she

met the compelling god of Love — who threw back her graceful head.

"But *I* will never be harnessed!" cried the young voice.

Her father glanced at her with a half-mocking smile.

"So Psyche may have declared," he said; "but had she persisted in refusal, she would have missed much. The Greeks were heathens, but they grasped a great truth, — that the human soul must learn through love, and that love means suffering."

"*Always*, papa?"

"Always, my Psyche. Who has not loved has not lived, and who has not suffered has not loved. It is a hard law, but there is no escape from it."

"There might be, perhaps, if one were wise," the girl murmured as if to herself.

But her father shook his head.

"No," he answered quickly, "there is no escape." And then she heard him repeating in a low tone some lines from the "Vita Nuova."

There fell another brief silence, while the girl stood observing his deft fingers moulding the plastic clay into shape, even as the great force of which he had spoken moulds and forms human character. Possibly some such thought was in her mind as she watched the work, pleasantly conscious the while of the refreshing coolness of the large bare room, with its lofty ceiling, its evenly diffused light, and the sound of water dripping from the statue to the floor. But when, after a few moments, she spoke again it was in a different tone:

"The *facteur* has been here, has he not? Did he leave no letters?"

"Oh, yes!" her father replied, with a start of recollection. "There are two or three. You will find them on that table. None are of any importance except one — that with an American stamp. Read it."

The girl walked over to the table, opened and read the letter indicated. Then she turned with it in her hand.

"Why, papa," — and her voice was full of surprise — "this is from some one I never heard of before. Richard Darracote! Who is he?"

"My cousin — the nearest relative I have living," her father responded. "It has been many years — Heaven only knows how many — since I heard of or from him before."

"So he says; yet he writes as if you had once known each other very well."

"As well as most brothers. In our early youth we were closely associated; but we were always very different in our tastes and inclinations, so in life we have drifted far apart."

"Tell me something about him. Why have you never mentioned him before?"

"Because I have never thought of him, I suppose. We were never sympathetic. How he used to sneer at my fancies, and how I despised his! Well, he has been a very successful man in his line — that is, he has accumulated, I believe, a great deal of money, while I have not been successful in mine. But I would no more change with him now than I would have changed in our boyhood, when I scorned him for what seemed to me his sordid, commonplace ambitions. One good thing about such ambitions,

however, is that they may be realized. It requires only some perseverance to grub successfully in the earth. To climb to the stars is another matter. And yet some of us are fools enough to hope to accomplish it."

His daughter was accustomed to the tone in which he uttered these words, — a tone at once mournful and philosophic, but without a trace of bitterness. His sincerity it was impossible to doubt. One of those who try to climb to the stars Gilbert Darracote had indeed ever been: one who never surrendered an ideal, never made any of the compromises with life which most of us are constantly making; never sought to please or flatter that modern substitute for ancient tyrants, the public fancy; had not in him a single element of the time-server; and hence, with his undoubted genius, he remained unsuccessful and unknown, while men of lesser gifts basked in the full light of fame and fortune.

"He speaks of an old debt which he would like to pay," said Irma, her eyes returning to the letter in her hand. "What does he mean by that?"

"He means a debt which he does not owe to me but to the dead," Darracote answered. "I have not the least desire that he should remember or pay it. It is not a debt which money *can* pay — and he is thinking of money. How impossible it is for a man who has spent his life in the pursuit of pelf to comprehend and believe that another man may honestly despise it!"

"And yet money is not a bad thing," Irma ventured to suggest, a vision of fragrant, glowing roses rising before her.

Her father looked at her with a smile.

"No, daughter of Eve," he replied, "it is not bad, if one can keep the love of it out of one's soul, and the soil of it off one's hands, and use it only for good and unselfish ends. But this is hard to do, — so hard that you know what we are told about the camel and the eye of the needle."

"But that does not mean that a rich man cannot possibly enter the kingdom of heaven, papa!"

"No, it does not mean that it is impossible for him to do so, but only difficult — so difficult that he who is wise will not voluntarily take the risk."

"And yet people are not only willing but eager to take it!"

Gilbert Darracote nodded.

"Very eager," he assented dryly; "so eager that they betray their best friends, stain their honor, and darken their souls in order to take it."

"Then, papa, if it were offered to you, — if, for instance, this rich cousin of yours who says that he owes you a debt were to leave you some money, would you refuse to take it?"

"That rich cousin of mine is only a year or two older than I am — "

"But he speaks of ill health in this letter. I suppose he would not mention *death* for the world; but it seems to me that is what he implies, that is why he is so anxious to hear from you, and if it is possible to see you."

"Well, if he were to die — poor old chap, I hope he will not; for truly death is bitter to a rich man! — and if he were to leave me a little money in acknowledgment of my father's kindness to him, I should

not feel that I had a right to refuse it for your sake, my dear. But there 's nothing less likely than that he has anything of the kind in his mind. So build no castles in Spain, but run now and put on your Greek costume. I find that I can't manage without a sitting, after all."

II

"I AM sorry," said Darracote, "but I cannot possibly accept the offer."

The words were so unexpected that the group of listeners were struck for a moment into silence, and each showed astonishment in a different manner.

Xavier Dufresne, a middle-aged painter, famous as a leader of the most extreme school of modern art, — to whom years brought no crystallization of thought or methods, but whose latest Salon picture was always a little more startling, a little more provocative of criticism and discussion than the one of the year before, — lifted his eyebrows and sat back in his chair, staring at his friend. Ralph Norbert, a young American, who, as a consequence of springing from the newest, least artistic of modern peoples, had violently recoiled toward all that was oldest and most spiritual in art, stopped in the act of rolling a cigarette and looked interrogatively at Irma. She, after a moment's pause of surprise, flung herself, as it were, on her father.

"Papa!" she exclaimed remonstrantly. "What do you mean? It is n't possible that you will refuse such an opportunity — such a tribute!"

Her father glanced at her with a smile. There was something else, something sad, in his expression, which struck Dufresne's observant eye.

"My experience of life," he said, "is not, I suppose, very different from that of others. We are told that it is of common occurrence that the thing one desires, that one toils and hopes for through years of effort, comes at last too late — when it comes at all. This is the case with me at present. The opportunity I should have welcomed a little earlier comes now too late; I cannot use it."

"But why not — why not?" Irma demanded insistently, while the two artists looked their echo of her question.

Gilbert Darracote's glance swept them all with a recognition of their surprise, and then dwelt again on Irma's face.

"Well, for one thing," he said, as if with a sudden inspiration, "because I cannot afford to neglect the summons in that letter which I received the other day — because I must accept my cousin's invitation and take you to America."

"Papa!" (It was absolute indignation in her voice now.) "How can you put me off with such an excuse, such a jest as that?"

"It is not a jest," he replied gravely. "I mean what I say."

"But it is impossible!" the girl cried incredulously. "It is impossible you can seriously mean that you will refuse a great artistic opportunity in order to accept an invitation which, if it offers anything at all, offers only money! You cannot expect me to believe that!"

Darracote looked at his friend, the middle-aged painter, who was watching him with such keen eyes, and shrugged his shoulders, laughing.

"It is an inconvenient thing to have a reputation for consistency," he said. "When one wishes to assert one's common human right to do an inconsistent thing, one excites only astonishment and incredulity."

"That is all, *mon ami*," answered Dufresne. "We are astonished, and, like Mademoiselle Irma, we are incredulous. We cannot believe that you will refuse this, which she has truly called a great opportunity for proving the power which you possess and winning the fame which should be yours; and still less can we believe that you will refuse it in order to secure some money."

"But if it is true?"

"Ah!" (It was the turn of the painter to shrug his shoulders.) "If it is true, there is no more to be said, except that indeed one does not know anybody."

"And there is nothing more true than that," said Darracote, simply.

After which silence fell. It was evening, and they were sitting on the lawn under the trees in a golden sunset, — dinner over, a table in the midst of the circle of chairs bearing coffee, liqueurs, cigars. It was a pleasant and familiar scene; for there were few evenings when there was not such a group gathered here, — when two or three of Gilbert Darracote's friends, all of them men in the full tide of artistic and intellectual life, did not find it agreeable to come out from the boulevards to this quiet Passy

house, and smoke a pipe or two on the lawn or in the studio, while discussing all the topics which filled the keen, throbbing, quick-living world of Paris. Darracote, who had spent his life in this world, was as much one of themselves as if his eyes had not opened under an alien sky; and there was no one of them, not the most brilliant and successful, who did not admire, respect, and in a certain sense love, this quiet, modest, self-contained man, with his comparatively unrecognized genius and his dreamer's soul.

To-day Xavier Dufresne had come with great tidings. He had heard — privately, but through an authoritative source — that a literary society but little less exalted than the august Academy had decided to place with Darracote the order for a statue of one of its members — a great poet, lately dead. The order was in itself the highest possible compliment, especially when paid to a foreigner; and the notice, the reputation, the "advertising" — so dear, alas! even to the artist in the modern world — resulting from it would be enormous. Dufresne confided his news and his pleasure to Norbert, whom he had met in the Passy omnibus, bound to the same house with himself. They rejoiced over it together, agreed that it would bring a rush of fame and prosperity to one who had been too long denied his just meed of both; and, with the sense of agreeable elation which accompanies the consciousness of bearing good tidings, entered on the familiar lawn where Gilbert Darracote and his daughter, sitting together under the trees, — he placidly smoking, she reading aloud, — greeted them warmly.

And then had come the disappointment of his reply, — that astonishing reply for which they had been so wholly unprepared. That he could entertain the thought of refusing this great, this flattering opportunity had not entered their minds as a possibility. But now it appeared that what did not occur to him as a possibility was the thought of accepting it.

In the silence which followed his last words, the two artists merely glanced at each other; but Irma, who caught the glance, suddenly felt that she could not remain quiet; that, since it was impossible to seize her father at present and *compel* him to tell her what he really meant by such dark sayings, she must go away. She could not sit still and see his friends do him the injustice of believing him. So she rose and went toward the house. Norbert, with a quick movement, sprang to his feet and followed her. The two elder men watched them for a moment as they moved across the lawn; then Dufresne's eyes turned again to his companion.

"And now, my friend," he remarked, "for the *mot de l'énigme.*"

Darracote smiled.

"So you are like Irma," he said; "you positively refuse to believe me?"

"It does not sound very well, I admit; but, as a matter of fact, it is true," the other coolly replied. "I do not for an instant believe that if you really intend to refuse this order, you will refuse it for the reason you have given."

"And yet," said Darracote, with a gravity not to be misunderstood, "that reason is literally true."

"Literally true!" Dufresne repeated thoughtfully. "Well, perhaps so, — many things are 'literally' true which in spirit are untruths. And when it comes to a question of which to believe, the testimony of a man's lips or the testimony of his whole life, I, for one, never hesitate. It is the testimony of the latter which I regard. And that is so far against you, *mon ami*, that further evasions are useless. You will never convince anybody who has known you so long as I have, — and, despite what we agreed upon a moment ago, there *is* such a thing as knowing a man, though he may now and then startle us by proving that we don't know all of him, — you will never, I say, convince me that you are giving up a great artistic opportunity for the sake of gaining money in any degree."

A pause followed, in which Darracote smoked, and, with his clear blue eyes fastened on some green masses of foliage in front of him, seemed to reflect; then, with the air of one who has taken a sudden resolution, he looked at Dufresne.

"After all, there is no reason why I should not tell you the real as well as the literal truth," he said. "I am only anxious that Irma shall not suspect it. I cannot accept this order because it comes too late in every sense, but especially in the sense that I have but a short span of life left; and in that span I must, for the first time, think of material things — of the money which I have always despised. Perhaps I have made a mistake in despising it, in scorning many means by which I might have acquired it; but, however that may be, I cannot afford to despise it now for *her*" — he looked after his

daughter's vanishing form. "I cannot neglect any opportunity to provide for her future. And such an opportunity came to-day in the letter of which you heard me speak to her."

Dufresne, now as deeply shocked as he had been astonished before, showed his emotion to a degree which would have amazed those who knew only the cool, cynical surface which he displayed to the world. He leaned forward, with agitation and distress in every line of his face.

"What are you talking about?" he asked. "How can you possibly know such a thing as this?"

"I have known it, or at least I have suspected it, for some time past, by certain admonitions which nature gives," Darracote answered calmly; "but lately I have had also the verdict of science. I went to see R—— the other day" (he named a great specialist), "and he tells me I have organic disease of the heart, so advanced that I may die at any time and cannot possibly live very much longer. Therefore, instead of accepting orders for statues with a view to future fame, I am going to take Irma to America to a relative who has suddenly remembered my existence, and who is, I believe, very rich."

Again silence fell, — silence in which the two men looked at each other, and then what he saw in the face of the listener made Darracote suddenly extend his hand.

"Thanks, old friend!" he said. "It is good of you to feel it so much."

Dufresne gave a wringing pressure to the hand, and then, rising abruptly, walked away a few steps. He was indeed astonished at the strength of his

own feeling. Had this been foretold to him, he could never have believed that he would be so deeply affected by the shadow of final parting which hung over this friendship of years. In truth, he had a sudden comprehension of the great differences which lie in character, and which give a charm to some human associations far deeper, far more lasting, than can be accounted for by anything which is to be seen on the surface.

Presently he came back with his composure restored, and, sitting down, lighted a cigar with a hand which shook slightly.

"Your confidence is sacred to me," he said. "But let me remind you that even the greatest specialists sometimes make mistakes. The case may not be so bad as R—— thinks. Many a man has lived for years after the doctors have read his death-warrant."

Darracote tapped his left side significantly.

"There is something here which tells me that no mistake has been made; and some day — quite soon, I think — a cold hand which has already clutched this heart many times will seize it once for all; and then — well, then I shall know the great Secret. Meanwhile the Society of Letters and Art must find another sculptor to fill its order."

"Well, at least they shall offer you the order," said Dufresne, decidedly. "That will be a recognition of your ability — a late tribute, but your due."

Darracote made an indifferent motion with his pipe.

"Why give them that trouble?" he said carelessly. "Better let them know that I cannot take it."

"No," persisted Dufresne. "You shall have that triumph at least, and I will see that the journals know of it. But must you really go to America — to the hard, practical, mercenary atmosphere you have so often described to me? My dear friend, if you and the doctors are right, stay here in Paris, — stay and die where you have loved best to live."

"And so I would," replied Darracote, "if I might. But, you see, I am thinking of the child. She is so young — and so beautiful. Over here, without fortune, she would have no position. But at home the name of Darracote means something, and my cousin has gilded it afresh with wealth. He writes to me with strange kindness, considering that for years we have heard nothing of each other; begs me to come to see him; reminds me of an old debt of kindness which he owed to my father; speaks of wishing to know Irma. And for her sake I must go."

"For her sake," Dufresne admitted, "perhaps it is best. But for your own sake I wish that you could remain."

The other looked up at the green boughs, interlacing against the misty blue of the tender sky of France, which he loved so well.

"For my own sake," he said wistfully, "I wish that I could."

III

MEANWHILE Irma, hearing the quick step behind her, had paused and looked around as Norbert, coming up, said, with some hesitation:

"I hope you don't mind my following you? I — I want to ask how the Psyche is getting on."

"The Psyche?" the girl repeated, half absently. "Oh, very well! Would you like to see it?"

"Very much indeed — if I may."

"Then we will go to the studio, for of course you may."

"But you were going —"

"Nowhere in particular. I came away because I cannot understand why papa should talk as he did. Asking an explanation seemed of no use — at least at present. When we are alone I will make him tell me what he really means. It is impossible, you know," — she faced the young man with her brows knitted into a frown, — "that he really intends to refuse this order!"

"It ought to be impossible," Norbert agreed. "But he spoke very positively."

"It *is* impossible!" the girl repeated with vehemence. "I know that he has not much ambition, that he does not care in the least whether or not the world recognizes his genius, but he has no right to reject such a tribute as this when it comes at last."

"One can't but find it strange that he should think of doing so," said Norbert. "The excuse about a letter and going to America —"

"Is absurd!" Irma broke in. "That letter is from some one of whom I never heard before, — a cousin of ours, — a man who is very rich; who asks us to visit him, and intimates that it will be to our advantage, as the advertisements say, to do so. But when papa received the letter he spoke very lightly of it, and apparently thought no more of going to America than of going to Africa. Yet *now* he makes it an excuse for refusing a great artistic opportunity! It is only an excuse — I am sure of that; but why does he make it? That is what I cannot understand."

Norbert could not help her to understand it. Without the *mot de l'énigme* of which Monsieur Dufresne had spoken, it was indeed impossible to understand.

"You will have to wait for the explanation, which your father will no doubt give you," he said.

"But why should any explanation be necessary?" the girl cried impatiently. "And why should papa do himself such injustice as to talk so? Oh, it is intolerable! I feel as if I must go back and force him to tell us what he really means."

"No, no!" said Norbert, hastily, who had no mind to resign his opportunity, whatever Mr. Darracote might choose to do with that offered him. "I am sure your first impulse is better. Wait until you can speak to him alone. At present, you know you have promised to show me the Psyche."

"I hope it is not too late for you to see it," she said, as they entered the house and passed through to the atelier.

But when she opened the door, by contrast with the dusky passage, the large room seemed filled

with light. Not only did the great north window still admit a flood of it, but some radiant, floating clouds — last fragments of the sunset's glory — cast through the skylight a marvellous glow upon the figure just beneath it.

And that figure! As he saw it in this fairy radiance, Norbert fairly caught his breath, so exquisitely aerial and graceful did it appear. He walked forward and paused in silence. Impossible for words to express the admiration roused by a thing so beautiful, so full of buoyant life, that it seemed as if it must have been the direct creation of God rather than of the mere genius of man.

"It does n't appear to be matter at all, but incarnate spirit," he said presently. "It is as if it had only rested for an instant on the earth and were about to spring upward before one's eyes."

"It is marvellous how strongly that impression is conveyed," said Irma. "The longer one looks at the figure the more one is surprised that it lingers in its upward flight. I don't believe there ever could have been a more perfect embodiment of Psyche, as the Greeks dreamed of her. And I don't think so," she added, smiling, "because I had the small part in it of serving as the model."

"It was not a small part," said Norbert. "This is as perfect a representation of yourself as it is a perfect embodiment of Psyche."

"Nonsense!" she laughed. "There is a likeness, of course, but what we admire and marvel at — the wonderful *spirit* — came from no model. It was given by that power of genius which is so divine

that it makes one think of the creative power of God."

"That," said the young man, "is true. But you are mistaken if you think that it is not a representation of yourself in spirit, as well as in the physical likeness. One has only to look at you to perceive it."

He suited action to words by turning to look at her, as she stood in the sunset light by the side of the statue where all the fugitive charm of her youth and beauty had been fixed by a master hand. And as he did so, he saw, as only an artist could see, how identical were the graceful lines of the form, the charming contour of the features, but he also saw that the likeness lay deeper than these things. The artist soul, as well as the artist eye, comprehended that as the joyous, upturned face of the nymph expressed all that was possible to the human soul before it had met the great Teacher, — Pscyhe before she had loved and suffered, — so in the living girl there was a spirit, fine, delicate, full of aspiration, as yet unaroused to all the fateful potentialities of feeling and passion.

"I don't know whether your father meant it, or not," he went on; "but he has succeeded in producing an ideal Psyche simply because he has perfectly presented you."

If Irma remembered that her father had said the same thing, she was very far from acknowledging it.

"My father's genius does not need such assistance," she said; "and if it did, what have I in common with the ideal Psyche?"

"Everything," the young man answered boldly.

"For what is Pscyhe but the human soul — exquisite, enchanting, yet not wakened to its full powers by the knowledge of love?"

The girl drew herself up quickly.

"If Psyche were wise, she would never wish to be awakened to that knowledge," she said coldly, "for it means bondage."

"No," Norbert protested, without pausing to point out how thoroughly this expression of sentiment sustained his opinion, "it means growth, development. What would Psyche be if she never advanced beyond that stage?" and he pointed to the statue.

"Free and happy," Irma returned unhesitatingly. "She is incarnate joyousness, as one sees her there; but think how the Greeks — who knew everything — represented her after she met Eros!"

"Love is master of us all when he comes," Norbert said; "and if he brings pain and even bondage, — why, they are a pain and a bondage one would not be without."

Irma shrugged her shoulders, and made even that ungraceful motion graceful as well as expressive.

"Every one to his taste," she said, "but it strikes me that pain and bondage are things one could very well do without."

"It is impossible!" Norbert exclaimed vehemently. "You cannot be so obtuse, so blind to everything best worth having and knowing in human life! Are you really willing to remain ignorant of the depths of your own nature? — never to give, never to receive the love — "

He stopped short, for Irma turned to him with a look such as he had never seen on her face before —

a look of reproach, defiance, indignation, all blended together.

"Why do you *venture* to make such a personal application of what we were saying?" she asked. "We were not talking of what *I* might or might not feel —"

"We were talking of that and of nothing else," he interrupted. "You know it as well as I. And you must know something else — that love is here, close beside you, begging that you will open your heart to him; begging you to believe that he asks only to be your servant, your slave —"

"That he may end by being my master!" she cried. "No, no — yet again, no! I will never open my heart to him. Understand that once for all; and never speak to me in this manner again."

There was a moment's pause. The evanescent sunset glow was fading, but in the gray light of the north window they could still clearly see each other — the pale young faces, confronting in the old duel between man and woman. Suddenly courage came to Norbert. He made a step forward and seized her unwilling hands.

"Let us have done with foolish metaphors and talk plainly," he said. "You know that I love you, — love you with a passion which I have no power to express. Do you mean that you will never open your heart to *that* love?"

He had not meant, nor would he have wished, to be piteous; but there was a piteous, piercing tone in his voice as he asked the question, which touched the girl with a sudden sense of what was involved in her answer, — a comprehension that she was face

"Suddenly courage came to Norbert."

to face with a possibility of great suffering. She was so deeply startled that she forgot her indignation, and a quick desire to avoid giving pain took possession of her. She attempted, therefore, what the inexperienced woman in such cases always attempts — to evade, to compromise.

"How can I tell?" she said. "You have no right to ask me such questions."

"I have the right of loving you — *loving you!*" he replied, emphasizing his words with a painful grasp of her hands. "Do you know what that means? Have you the least — the very least — idea?"

Had she uttered her thoughts she would have answered, "No, and I have no desire to know!" But stronger even than the impulse of impatience was the impulse not to give pain. So she expressed herself differently.

"You are right in thinking that I am like the Psyche," she said, with an attempt to take the conversation back to its former plane. "I do not know. And I cannot say that I wish to know. So please don't talk in this way any more. I like you so much. We have been such good friends and comrades. Pray don't spoil our pleasant association by this — this — "

"Folly," said he, supplying the word over which she hesitated. He dropped her hand and turned away. "If that is all it is to you!" he said with a gesture of renunciation.

And then — poor boy! he did not wish to be tragic, but it seemed inevitable — he dropped into a chair, folded his arms on the table beside it and let his head fall upon them.

The girl stood still, looking at him, poignant regret and intense distaste visible in equal degree on her face. Why, she was asking, why would he insist upon making himself so disagreeable, and spoiling all their pleasant companionship? It was detestable, and yet — the tears suddenly rose to her eyes. Never had she seen distress without compassionating it; and this distress was caused, however unconsciously, by herself. She hesitated an instant longer, and then laid her slender white hand on the dark shoulder.

"I am very sorry," she said gently. "I did not mean to be unkind; I would do anything sooner than give you so much pain. Surely you believe this!"

No answer. Possibly Norbert did not speak because he could not trust his voice to do so; but the silence struck chill on Irma's heart. It seemed full of resentment, alienation, pain. Had she indeed lost her friend, — the friend who was more of a comrade to her youth than any other of those who made up her father's circle; who had in some subtle way established himself more intimately; whose unspoken adoration had been, although she was not aware of it, like incense about her path? She had heard of this masterful tyranny of love, which would have all or nothing, which disdained the lesser if it could not possess the greater; but this was the first time that its imperious demand had touched her life. She recoiled from it with something akin to indignation; and yet, the affectionate heart asked, how could she bear to lose her friend? Was there no middle way between refusing all and granting all

that he asked? — no way of conciliating, pleasing, keeping him until he should forget this folly?

"*Voyons!*" she said at last, very softly and sweetly. "Is it not possible to come to an understanding, to arrange something? All this is new to me: no one ever talked to me of love before; and, frankly, I do not like it. But — will you be satisfied if I promise to — to think of what you desire?"

He lifted his head; as he looked up and caught the expression on the lovely face bent over him, — an expression of exquisitely tender concern, — his heart gave a great leap. Who is not quick to believe that which he desires? And so he said to himself that surely this was the first faint dawning of love, this which he read in her face, and which was like balm to his wounded heart. Nevertheless pride and generosity forbade that he should snatch at what she offered.

"I am afraid you speak so only because you are sorry for me," he said; "and that will not do. I am a fool — worse than a fool — to have no more self-control and to seem to appeal to your pity. Because you are sorry is no reason for promising anything. But if you could love me — even in the least degree — to begin with —"

What infinite appeal in the eyes and tone as he broke off! It might have moved one older, more experienced than the girl who stood before him with a troubled face. How could she answer? What did she know of the strange, complex feeling of which he spoke? Perhaps the reluctance to pain him, to see him go, was the love he asked; and, if so, why not please him with the assurance of so much at least?

Another moment and she might have given this assurance, might have pledged herself to far more than she comprehended; but as she still stood looking at him in the dying light — troubled, uncertain, wavering — steps were heard outside; a hand touched, opened the door, and her father's voice was heard:

"Come in! I will soon make a light. I want you to see it."

IV

"PAPA," said Irma, thoughtfully, "what is called love is a strange and — not a pleasant thing."

Mr. Darracote started, and in his surprise almost dropped the pipe he was smoking, as, turning in his chair, he stared at his daughter. Their guests were gone, and they were alone in the studio: he sitting in an easy attitude, contemplating the Psyche of which Dufresne had been loud in praise, and Dufresne's praise, as he knew well, was always sincere and never readily evoked; while Irma, after flitting about with unusual restlessness, had finally paused near him, and broken a meditative silence with the remark recorded.

It was a remark naturally startling to the ear of a parent who had not imagined that the speaker possessed any more personal knowledge now of the subject of which she spoke than she had possessed in her childhood. To him she was still a child, to whom he might talk in his whimsical fashion of Eros and Psyche; but whose serene maiden quietude, he

had taken for granted, was to be unruffled by the faintest stirring of the wings of the god for many a day to come.

"What on earth do you know about it?" he inquired, in the first impulse of his surprise.

She looked at him, meeting his startled gaze without the faintest trace of embarrassment, and laughed sweetly and gayly.

"More than I care to know, I assure you," she answered. "For it is tiresome and stupid — yes, positively odious — when somebody whom you like very much is not satisfied with what ought to satisfy him, but wants something more, — something which you have no power to give him; and says, like a spoiled child, that he must have that or nothing. And so you have to choose between losing your friend, or — or trying to give what you have not got."

"Oh!" said Mr. Darracote. It was not difficult to grasp the meaning of this luminous statement. "So somebody has been wanting something which you have no power to give him, and declares he must have that or nothing! *Eh bien!* he must take nothing, then. That is all there is to be said."

"But, papa, it is very unreasonable."

"Very," he said dryly. "But reason has never been considered the strong point of lovers, my dear. And I presume that the plain meaning of all this is that some one has been making love to you?"

"Yes," she said. "I suppose that is what you would call it."

"Norbert, of course?"

"Yes."

"Young ass! He deserves to be kicked for his folly and presumption."

Never before had Irma heard such a tone of disgusted irritation from her father's lips. It was her turn now to look surprised.

"Why do you say that?" she asked. "It may be folly, but why presumption?"

"Why presumption?" repeated her father, in the same tone of unfamiliar irritation. "Because, in the first place, he has no right to suppose that you would give him a thought; in the second place, he should not have ventured to address you as if you were a *grisette;* and in the third place, what has he to offer you?"

"I suppose he thought — his heart," said the girl, reflectively.

"His heart!" Mr. Darracote gave an angry laugh as he knocked the ashes out of his pipe. "That might serve for a *grisette;* but for you — well, I am to blame for keeping you here in this Bohemian atmosphere, which is not the place for you, now that you are no longer a child. Perhaps it was not the place for you at any time, but you have not been unhappy in it, I think; and I have been very happy in your companionship."

"Papa!" — a quick, impulsive arm was flung around his neck, — "how dare you talk so? Not unhappy in it! As if there were, as if there could be, any other place for me in the world but this!"

She laid her satin-soft cheek down on his brow, and he was silent for a moment, drinking in the sweetness of the caress. Then he put up his hand and patted the graceful young head, murmuring some

of the tender Italian words which he had learned from her mother's lips.

"But it is true, all the same, my darling!" he resumed, again in English, after a moment or two. "We have been very happy in our Bohemia, I know that well; but Bohemia is no place for you now. You have grown out of childhood — God forgive me that I forgot it! — and I cannot have you continuing here, without any social life, or a woman to look after you; subject to the off-hand love-making of any penniless art-student who falls in love with your beauty and dares to address you with no more ceremony — "

"Papa, papa!" she laughed. "Who could have guessed that you were such an aristocrat at heart! Why, I thought we were genuine Bohemians, lovers of freedom, despisers of conventionality. I am sure I have heard you say so often enough. And now, one would fancy you were a prince; and I, mademoiselle, your daughter, heiress of your marble halls, not to be approached by any suitor until he first laid his pretensions before your highness."

But her jesting could not win him to jesting in reply.

"I have been to blame," he repeated. "Because it was so delightful to have you always with me, I kept you in a life which might have sullied you; and it is no thanks to me that it has not done so. It is no thanks to me that you are not in love with the young fool who ventured to express his passion to you this evening, or with some one worse — some *rapin* of the studios — "

He broke off, as if unable to face the possibilities which his words suggested; while Irma listened with

amazement to what was an unexpected revelation of character. For she could not have imagined in her father this pride, — not indeed for himself, but for her, — this valuing of social forms which she had supposed him to despise; and this aristocratic instinct so keenly alive, so ready to rise in arms on her behalf after a lifetime of Bohemian indifference to everything that such an instinct might be supposed to demand. It was her first experience of the paradox, the contradiction, the complexity, to be found more or less in all character, but especially in that which possesses the strange and puzzling artistic quality.

"But," she said presently, — still perched on the arms of his chair, and with her head bent down to his so that the dark and silvery curls mingled, — "I think you are very much too hard on yourself, and I am not sure that I care for any society more exalted than that of Bohemia. Remember what you have always told me: that everywhere else in the world, among the great as among the *bourgeoisie*, a man is valued for what he possesses, but in Bohemia alone he is valued for what he *is*. You can't deny that, you know; and since it is so, I prefer Bohemia to a world where one is valued according to the length of one's purse."

Mr. Darracote looked uncomfortable.

"My dear," he said, "I am afraid you have taken too literally many things which I have said."

"I don't think so, papa. I have always thought everything you said was so full of wisdom that I could not take it too literally."

He laughed.

"What mingled flattery and sarcasm! But see

now!" — he drew her in front of him and seated her on a low stool at his feet. "Does this enthusiasm for Bohemia mean that you have, after all, any fancy for that young idiot who has ventured to make love to you?"

She hesitated a moment before making a reply, but evidently only that she might reflect upon the question. Then she shook her head.

"No, it does not mean that. Why should it? He is a small part of Bohemia. Yet I like him very much. And you know we have always agreed that there is something exceedingly attractive about him."

"Yes," Mr. Darracote assented. "He is very attractive, — not nearly so clever as these French scamps, but with a sterner moral stamina and a delicacy of feeling on subjects where they have none at all. Also he possesses talent, and the temperament of the artist. That means much."

Irma looked at the table where the young head had been cast down in the pain which her heart ached to recall. Was that what it meant — capacity for suffering — "the temperament of the artist"?

"I like him very much," she repeated; "and I was very sorry for him, so sorry that I almost promised to take into consideration what he asked."

Her father started.

"What! You almost promised —"

"But before I could do so, you came in with Monsieur Dufresne."

"It was a lucky inspiration on my part," he said dryly; "although I should have made short work of such a promise, had you given it. You are but a child yet, *carissima;* and you do not know that 'lik-

ing' a man very much is no reason for promising him anything. Neither is the fact that you are sorry for him. You said the other day that if you were Psyche you would never suffer Eros to harness you to his car. You will change your mind about that, no doubt, as we all do sooner or later. But, until that time comes, I want you to remember that there is a much worse bondage than to be harnessed by Eros; and that is to suffer yourself, for any reason whatever, to be harnessed *without* him."

He spoke with an emphasis which sank deep. Long afterward Irma retained the memory of this moment with a strange vividness. She had but to close her eyes for the inward vision to recall herself leaning against her father's knee, the familiar scene of the studio around them; the bronze hanging lamp — a Pompeiian shape — throwing its radiance over the joyous figure of the nymph beneath it; her father's voice sounding with such rare earnestness in her ears; and herself gazing with wide, dark eyes — was it at the Psyche or into the unknown future?

"Do you think — are you sure," she said at length, very slowly, "that one always knows him — Eros, I mean? Might one not make a mistake?"

"Hardly," said her father, dreamily; for his thoughts, too, had wandered — but backward rather than forward. To his eyes had come a vision of the past, of the day, the hour, when he met a lovely Italian girl at the door of the Annunziata in Genoa, and knew, without an instant's doubt or hesitation, that his heart had found its mistress for life and for death. "When he comes, my dear, one recognizes him. There is no mistake," he said.

Another silence of a moment or two, and then Irma just breathed:

"Poor Monsieur Norbert!"

"There is no need to compassionate him," said her father, whose heart was just now hard against that offender. "He could not help falling in love with you, I suppose — I'll grant so much; but he could have helped making love to you as if — But there! One must allow for ignorance. If he were a Frenchman, I should deal very sharply with him; but since he is an American, it is necessary to remember the provincial standard of manners. However, I will take care that he has no more opportunities to forget himself. And, fortunately, we shall soon be going away."

The last words recalled Irma to a sudden recollection of what had occurred earlier in the evening: her father's strange refusal to accept an order so flattering to him; and his equally strange expression of a resolution to go with her to America, a country which she knew him to dislike.

"Papa!" she cried, turning toward him with sudden energy, "I insist upon knowing exactly and truly what you meant by all that you said to Monsieur Dufresne about refusing the order for that statue, and going away."

Mr. Darracote smiled, though a little uncomfortably. He had foreseen this inquisition; but it was, nevertheless, not altogether easy to parry.

"So you 'insist' upon knowing, and 'exactly and truly'!" he said, in a tone of raillery. "Your Majesty is pleased to be imperative."

"But have n't I a right to be imperative," she

demanded, "when you do something so uncharacteristic and so inexplicable? For it *is* inexplicable — you know it is. You know that you do not expect me to believe that you would refuse a great artistic opportunity in order to go to America to see a cousin for whom you care nothing, because he offers you the prospect of some money!"

She flung out the words scornfully, while her indignant eyes challenged him to denial. But he shrugged his shoulders with the air of a man who finds denial difficult.

"You put the matter strongly," he said; "but, in the main, correctly. I shall certainly refuse the order and go to America. It seems to you an inexplicable resolution, I know; but is it too much to ask you to withhold your judgment, to have a little faith in me? For see, my Irma," — his hand passed caressingly over her hair, — "it is not God alone whom we must trust, but also those whom we love, if we wish to have any peace of heart in this restless world. It is of your life that I am thinking, my dear child. I see and know much that you do not know. Trust me."

"Papa!" — she caught his hand in both her own. "You have betrayed yourself. I knew that it was so — I knew that you were thinking not of yourself but of me. It is too much. Do you think that I care for money — *I?* And you would give up the opportunity of proving to all the world what you are and what you can do, in order to obtain some money for me? Papa, it would be very cruel — cruel to yourself and cruel to me. You shall not do it!"

"Irma!"

What a sound it was! — something between a cry

and a gasp. In the girl's vehemence, her absorption in what she was saying, she had not observed the pallor which blanched his cheek. Now she saw the spasm of pain convulsing it, the hand drawn from her clasp and going to his heart, the labored breath, — she sprang to her feet with a cry of terror:

"Papa, what is it? — what can I do?"

He whispered one word, "Brandy!"

And while she flew for it he saw life and all it contained vanishing from him. Then the cold hand that had clutched his heart and made it stand still in a moment of mortal agony, once more relaxed its grasp; once more, slowly, laboredly, painfully, the organ of life began to beat. He drew a deep breath — there was to be yet another respite, how long or how short no one could say, before the great Secret was told.

"That was sharp!" he said to himself, as he lay back exhausted in his chair. "There will not be many more such warnings. Ah, my poor Irma!"

Even as he thought of her she came rushing in, the stimulant for which he had asked in her hand. He drank it, felt its powerful influence reviving him, strengthening, quickening the beating of his heart; and then looking up, he tried to smile to reassure her as she hung over him in a passion of anxiety.

"I am better," he whispered. "Don't be alarmed. It is over — for the present."

"But will it return?" She sank on her knees beside him. "Papa, what does it mean? — what is it?"

He hesitated. How could he tell her the truth? He had hoped to spare her any knowledge, and yet perhaps it was best that she should know, that she

should have so much preparation for the final, the inevitable blow.

"You must be very quiet," he said. "Don't agitate me, or it may return at once; for it is a trouble of the heart. Oh, nothing to be immediately alarmed about! I have had it a long time; but all such troubles contain possibilities of a danger, you know. Have I seen a doctor? Yes, not very long ago. I did not speak of it to you, for I did not wish to alarm you; but what he told me is the explanation of the resolution about America which puzzles you so much. He tells me that my heart is somewhat seriously affected; that I must be careful, avoid excitement; do little work, if possible none at all. 'Travel,' he said; 'rest; take an ocean voyage if you can.' So this is why I am going to be selfish enough to carry you off to America."

"Selfish!"—a flash of illumination, of perfect comprehension, came to the girl as she knelt, white-faced, beside him. She knew that he was trying to deceive her,—that the danger was far greater than his words allowed, that the plea for himself veiled an absolutely unselfish consideration for her; but with an incredible courage she suppressed all expression of this knowledge and of the fear rending her heart. His words, "Don't agitate me, or it may return," held her mute.

She never knew where she gained the power of self-control necessary to say, after a pause which lasted hardly more than a minute, but was long enough for her to pass forever out of the happy realm of childhood into the woman's kingdom of suffering and endurance:

"Yes, I understand now. But you should have told me before, and then I would not have troubled you with my foolish remonstrances. And we shall prepare to go immediately, shall we not? Oh, let us hope that the voyage will do you very much good! And I will see that nothing annoys or excites you, — nothing!"

V

IT was unfortunate for Norbert that Irma should so immediately after his declaration have learned the truth regarding her father's condition of health; for the greater interest at once and completely dominated the lesser. Indeed it would not be too much to say that it extinguished it altogether. Under ordinary circumstances, she could not have failed to think much of the first words of love that had ever fallen on her ear, the first glimpse she had ever been given into the depths of a human soul; and from such thinking who can say what might not have resulted? Love has many ways of entering, and does not always take the heart by storm; but steals in unknown under various guises, and laughs to find himself suddenly lord of the citadel. So it might have been in this case; for there was much to open the way for him, had not Fate interfered, and the girl learned in the same hour that she had a lover and that death menaced her father.

Naturally, the first knowledge sank into insignificance by the side of the last. It would have been likely to do so even had her heart been far more in-

clined than it was to consider Norbert's appeal; for the affection between father and daughter was of a rare strength and tenderness, amounting on her side to passionate devotion. Since her mother's death in early childhood they had been all in all to each other, in a manner and to a degree which was uncommon even in such cases, where loss has made a peculiar bond between a father and an only child. Each was to the other the most agreeable of companions; so, while the father had many twinges of self-reproach for keeping her so constantly with him, he could never nerve himself to the self-denial involved in sending her away. Once, indeed, with a great effort, hearkening to the remonstrances of his friend, the Abbé Ravoux, he had sent her to a convent; but the separation did not last long. He might possibly have been able to resist his own desire for her companionship had he known her to be satisfied and happy; but the child was miserable, pined for him as only a heart so passionate can pine for the object of its intense devotion; and begged so persistently not to be separated from him that he finally yielded, and took her home.

Thenceforth Irma's education was of the most desultory kind, and yet of a kind which possibly effected a better result for her nature and her character than a more methodical training would have accomplished. She went indeed for certain *cours* every day to an excellent school; but the hours she spent in the studio with her father — he working, she reading aloud the great Italian, French, and English classics, and listening with delight to his comments and interpretations — were what best deserved the name of education. And then the brilliant gatherings of her father's

friends, all men of remarkable gifts, if not always of genius, who possessed the flashing keenness, brightness, and wit of the great intellectual and artistic world in which they lived! It was no wonder that in this atmosphere her intelligence expanded like an opening flower, and that in thought she was far in advance of most girls of her age, while in feeling she was still a child.

Possibly the fact that she had little association with those of her own sex and age in some degree produced this result. Had she been left at school with other girls, she would have heard the usual chatter regarding lovers, toilets, and fashions; whereas in her life she rarely if ever heard these subjects of universal feminine interest mentioned. It was not only a masculine world in which she lived, but a mature masculine world, — a world for the most part of high thinking and strenuous *doing*, where if the Philistine and the *bourgeois* were scorned it was because of their mercenary ideals rather than because of their ignorance. It was Bohemia, indeed, but not the Bohemia of romances, nor yet that Bohemia of reality where conventionality is set at naught in order that vice may be indulged; but quite another Bohemia, that of workers too absorbed to think of or care for the trivial social side of life, and where, as Darracote had truly said, a man was valued simply and solely for what he was, what he had done or might do, rather than for what he possessed.

It was in this world that she had grown to womanhood; and although her father talked with self-reproach of the dangers it might have held for her, he had carefully guarded her from any such dangers.

He had dropped from his acquaintance, or at least from the intimacy of his house, every man whom he held to be unworthy to meet her; while among those who came there were few young men, and on these he kept a watchful eye. This watchfulness had been relaxed in some degree for Norbert, who had come to him with the personal claim of letters from an old friend in America, and whom he had liked, and trusted with a half-unconscious reliance upon what he termed his provincial standard of manners and conduct. It would not have been any Frenchman, whether "*rapin* of the studios" or not, who would have been allowed that *tête-à-tête* which Norbert had used for his own undoing; and perhaps there was a grim sense of satisfaction in the father's mind as he thought of the pain and disappointment of the "young fool" who had taken such truly American advantage of his confidence.

But with Irma there did not remain even a remembrance of that pain and disappointment after she had learned what Shadow hovered with dark wings above her father's head. Everything else, and certainly such a trifle as a lover, sank into insignificance beside the sorrow which threatened her; a sorrow so overwhelming, so revolutionizing, that she could not imagine what life would be like if it should fall upon her. As an abstract truth, she knew that all men were mortal; but that her father could die,— that this beloved companion, this being who filled all her existence, could be taken from her,— this her mind refused to credit. So, after a night of sleepless anguish, such as her young life had never known before, she rose in the morning with the determination

not to believe. Of course he was ill; she could not doubt that, remembering the white, drawn agony of his face. But how often were people ill who yet did not die! She would not be so foolish as to anticipate the worst; she would trust in the goodness of God, who knew so well that this dear father was all she had on earth. She would pray for his restoration to health, and she would watch over him; he should not fatigue or excite himself; they would take the voyage to America; they would go around the world if necessary. Oh, surely, by watchfulness and care and doing everything the doctors said, the disease could be kept at bay! She would not doubt it; she would be strong and cheerful, and not suffer her mind to dwell on dark possibilities, — possibilities far too dark ever to come to pass.

It was in this spirit that after the early breakfast at which her father never appeared, she went out with Margherita, according to their almost daily custom, to hear Mass in the old parish church of Passy. And although she had striven to reassure herself, and in a measure succeeded in doing so, enough of the shadow of fear remained to give a new meaning, a new spirit to the prayers which she poured forth, kneeling before the altar, and passionately addressing Him who has sounded all depths of human suffering. And after she had prayed with this intense passion and fervor she had again the firm conviction that what she dreaded was, in a sense, impossible. The tender and compassionate Lord, to whom she had spoken with childlike love and confidence, would certainly spare her father and give them yet many long years of life together.

L. of C.

So, with a heart much lightened, she left the church, and paused a moment outside to speak to her companion.

"Margherita, I promised to see Mademoiselle Camilla this morning. But there is no reason why you should come with me. It is but a short distance I have to walk, and you had better make your purchases quickly and go home."

Margherita looked very doubtful.

"The signor has always told me never to leave you when we are on the streets," she said. "He is careful, — he knows that it is not proper for a young lady to go about unattended. And why should I be in special haste to make my purchases this morning? There is no need."

"Yes, there is need," the girl answered. "My father might want something, — I insist upon it!"

"Oh, if it has come to that, — that you insist upon getting rid of me, — of course I must go," said Margherita, with high offence. "But if the signor asks me how it comes that I left you — "

"Tell him that it was my fault. Come, Margherita," — coaxingly, — "don't be foolish. I have no desire to get rid of you. But I am anxious about papa. He was a little indisposed last night, and I do not like him to be left alone. Yet I promised Camilla to see her this morning, so I must go, if only for a few minutes. But I will not go unless you promise me to return home quickly."

"What is the trouble, Signorina Irma? And what are you trying to induce our friend Margherita to do?" asked a pleasant voice.

The girl started and turned quickly. A tall, slender

man in the dress of a priest had addressed her and now stood smiling down at her; his fine head, with its clear-cut features, its broad brow, dark, commanding eyes, thin cheeks and lips, presenting a type at once ascetic, intellectual, and aristocratic.

"Ah, Monsieur l'Abbé," she exclaimed, "what an unexpected pleasure! When did you return to Paris?"

"Only a day or two ago," he replied; "and I have been intending to visit your father. I hope that he is well?"

A cloud fell suddenly over the brightness of the girl's face.

"No," she said sadly; "he is not well. He is ill, although I did not know it until last night. The trouble is with his heart; and although it may not be dangerous, — oh, I am sure it is *not* dangerous! — still, you know, one will be unhappy —"

"Yes," answered the Abbé, "I know."

The smile had left his finely cut lips now, as they closed gravely over these words, while into his eyes came a look of compassion. For he was a man not only of keen perceptions but one whom personal suffering had taught much; and he saw clearly, deep in the young eyes lifted to his own, the shadow of a mortal fear, unacknowledged, denied by bold words, but existing, nevertheless. Presently he repeated:

"I know. But our apprehensions often make us more unhappy than we need be. Somewhere in life Sorrow waits for us all, but to go to meet her by a single step is not only unnecessary but argues lack of faith in the good God. Why has He mercifully

veiled the future from us save that He desires that we should walk like children, trusting Him for the next step; and, whether it be in sunshine or in shadow, thanking Him? So do not cloud your sunshine by fears that may be unfounded. Perhaps your father's illness is not serious. Many persons live for years with affections of the heart."

"Yes, I have heard that," she said eagerly; "and I have told myself that it is folly to expect only the worst. So I have resolved to be brave, very brave, and look on the bright side. But I hope you will come to see us soon, Monsieur l'Abbé; for we are going to America."

"To America! Is it possible? But I have often heard Monsieur Darracote say that he wished to die — that is, to live always in France or in Italy."

"Oh, we are not going there to live!" she replied. "The doctors say that an ocean voyage will be good for him, and a relative has written begging him to come, and so he thinks it best to go."

"Ah! I comprehend," said the Abbé. And, in truth, very brief reflection was necessary to enable him to comprehend why Gilbert Darracote, stricken with mortal illness, knowing his span of life to be at once short and uncertain, should wish to place this beautiful and, in case of his death, unprotected girl with those upon whom she had claims of relationship. "It is no doubt best," he added, after a moment; "and possibly the voyage will do him much good. As for you, my child," — and the grave, gentle dark eyes seemed to envelop her with the penetrating kindness of their regard, — "try, as you have resolved, to be 'very brave,' and that means

also cheerful. You have always been the brightness of your father's life; do not cease to be that brightness when he will need it most. And, now, if I come this evening shall I find your father at home ?"

"Oh, yes, he will be at home, and will be delighted — always delighted — to see you, Monsieur l'Abbé!"

"Then you may expect me this evening, so *au revoir!*"

He lifted his broad-brimmed hat with the air of a man of the world, — an air retained from the days when he had been one of the foremost among the young diplomats of France, — and passed on; while Irma turned again to Margherita.

"Go now," she said, in a tone which admitted of no question; "get what you need and hasten home. I myself will be back within an hour."

Having disposed of Margherita, Irma turned and walked quickly along a wide, well-shaded street in the direction of Paris. It was a quiet street, less pretentious than some of the neighboring avenues, but lined nearly all of the way between Passy and the great city with handsome, detached houses, set in more or less extensive grounds. The Arc de Triomphe was almost in sight when she paused at length before a tall house with a plain façade, entered an iron gate, which stood partly open, as if for the convenience of many persons passing in and out, walked around a winding path bordered by a high, well-trimmed hedge, mounted a flight of steps, and rang the door-bell. A white-capped maid answered the summons, and smiled in recognition of the visitor.

"Mademoiselle Vincent? Oh, yes, she was at home! Would Mademoiselle Irma go up to her room?"

Mademoiselle Irma replied that she would; and, with the cordial approval of the maid, who thus saw herself spared a journey of three flights of stairs, passed up the staircase. She was thoroughly familiar with the house; so when she reached the final landing she walked down a narrow passage, knocked at a closed door, and, hardly waiting for permission, opened it and entered the room within.

A very small room, but dainty and pleasant to the eye, with its dark polished floor, its draperies of gay flowered cretonne, its narrow white bed, and, best of all, its open window overlooking the tall trees and green alleys of a ducal garden. A girl with large brown eyes and a mass of fluffy chestnut hair sprang up from the only easy-chair the room contained, when Irma entered.

"Ah, how glad I am to see you!" she cried, embracing her in a very impulsive fashion. "If you had failed to come within half an hour, I must have gone out; and then you would not have heard my news, at least not immediately."

"And what is your news?" Irma asked, kissing her on both cheeks. "It must be good, for your eyes are shining like stars."

"And well they may!" the girl laughed. "I have just received a note from the *maestro*. He wishes to see me particularly. X—— and Z—— are here" (she named two noted *impresarios*), "and he wants to arrange for them to hear me sing."

"Ah!" Irma flashed, through sympathy, into an

animation almost equal to her own. "And that means?"

"That my time of waiting is nearly over. I am like a bird fluttering on the edge of its nest. I shall soon spread my wings, and then" — she opened her arms with a graceful gesture, as if they were wings — "then I shall fly away over the wide world, singing, singing, singing, and coining money!"

Irma shook her head with an air of rebuke.

"Don't, Camilla!" she said. "I cannot bear to hear you talk of coining money. It is not of *that* an artist should think."

"But it is of that they all do think," rejoined Camilla. "And of what else should I think? Is it likely that I would work as I have done, and as I shall still have to do, let even the best come, for the purpose of devoting myself to Art and giving pleasure to others? Bah! Of course I love my art, but I would never slave at it without the hope of its rewards."

"No one could possibly expect you to do so. But you should not talk as if money were the chief reward of which you thought."

"But how can I talk otherwise if it *is* the chief, *ma chère?* Fame is all very well, but what would it be worth without the money that accompanies it? Don't look so shocked! Everybody thinks just as I do, except your father and a few — very few — other idealists. As for my profession, it is well known that there are no more mercenary people in the world than musicians, especially singers."

"But that does not prove anything, Camilla."

"Look even at the *maestro!*" Camilla went on,

with energy. "I am devoted to him, but do you think I am blind to the reason of his fondness for me? How much would he care for me if I did not have what he calls 'a pearl of a voice'? And why does he value this pearl of a voice except for the money it is going to bring to me and to him? You are a dreamer, Irma *mia:* you have lived only in the studio, and read Dante, and heard the dear papa rhapsodize; but I — *I* have looked the world in the face, and I am not afraid of it. I will have it at my feet yet, and I will enjoy all that it can give. Oh, you will see!"

She was indeed the personification of one fitted to triumph over the world of which she spoke, as she stood, flushed, radiant, weakened by no self-distrust, ready to grasp with a splendid audacity all its prizes.

There are some natures born so to triumph, despite every obstacle which fate can place in their way. And obstacles had not been lacking to Camilla Vincent. Like Irma, she was the child of what it is the fashion to call an international marriage, her father having been an Englishman, her mother an Italian; but, unlike Irma, she had been left altogether an orphan while still a child. There had been a tie of distant cousinship between the mothers of the two girls, and a closer tie of friendship between their fathers.

It was at the house of Arthur Vincent, a young painter of great promise, that Gilbert Darracote met the lovely Italian girl with whom he had already fallen in love at the church door, and who later became his wife. The young painter died early, his fame still unmade, and his wife survived him but a few

years. Then her soul followed whither her heart had already gone; and Camilla was left to the charity of her Italian relatives on the one hand, and the unknown English connections of her father on the other. The first would willingly have provided for her, but they were of the class of professional people of narrow means, struggling to maintain a position and rear large families; while the second, belonging to that stratum of middle-class English society which is most narrowly insular in its feelings and sympathies, had little inclination to be troubled with the child of one who had in the first place forgotten himself so far as to adopt the beggarly calling of an artist, and in the second place had married an Italian and a "Romanist." Their grudging response to the claim which Camilla's relatives made on her behalf led the girl to refuse the pittance which they offered; and then, unwilling to remain longer a burden on her uncles, who had already cared for her mother for years, she went to Paris; and, through the efforts of Mr. Darracote, obtained a place as governess in the school where Irma took her *cours*.

But this was only a temporary arrangement. The brilliant girl had no intention of burying her talents in what is, in Europe at least, the absolute slavery of such a life: of becoming one of the immense army of governesses, obscure, ill-paid, hardly ranking above domestic servants. She possessed a superb voice, — one of those voices which seem to exist only in Italy or in those of Italian blood, — and she soon gave up everything else in order to devote herself to its cultivation; for this was one of the cases in which there could be no doubt of the final result.

That she would become a great singer was as much of a certainty as anything not accomplished can be; and if her master, a man of world-wide reputation, held her back, practised and trained, and still bade her "wait," it was only in order that he might the more effectively launch her at last on the road to fame and fortune. No one doubted that her success would be immediate; and the mistress of the school where Mr. Darracote had placed her was only too willing to keep her under her roof until she should leave it to spread her wings in earnest.

For herself, no faintest shade of that fear of failure which torments most aspirants to any form of fame ever disturbed her supreme self-confidence. While she had gone about Paris on foot as a shabby governess, hiding the beauty of her face behind a thick veil, she had often laughed in her heart at what seemed to her merely a masquerading; and thought of the time, so certain to come, when she would roll down the Champs-Elysées in her carriage, more admired, more observed, the object of more intoxicating homage than any royal princess. The obscurity of the present was not more real to her than the glory of the future. She knew the value of her voice as a tradesman knows the value of his wares; and, like a tradesman, she was determined to exact the last farthing of its value.

It was this spirit, the incipient cupidity which, when developed, makes the typical *prima-donna* perhaps the most rapacious and grasping of human creatures, that jarred upon Irma, child of an idealist and herself without the faintest mercenary taint in her nature. Therefore, although she smiled at the

last words, she was unable to refrain altogether from further protest.

"I have not the least doubt that I shall see all that you say," she answered. "You will be reigning like a queen — for who are such queens as the great singers! — while I am still reading Dante in the studio. And I am delighted that you are going to have the reward at last of your hard work and long waiting. Only I do wish that you would not think so much of the sordid side of it all — of money and the things money will buy."

"What would you have me think of?" Camilla asked, half-pityingly. She threw herself back in the easy-chair which Irma, preferring to sit near the window with its view into the garden, had declined. "I am not a dreamer — you know that. If I were, *ma foi!* I should put on the black veil: I should go into the cloister at once. But to live in the world and not desire the things of the world — now, I ask you, how is that possible?"

"It may not be possible altogether," Irma admitted; "but there is a higher and a lower aim: we may always choose. And to use the great gift, the great power of the artist, only for means of self-gratification, that is surely an aim which is very low. My father says —"

"Oh, I have heard him talk!" interrupted Camilla. "I know what he thinks. One should do one's best for the sake of doing one's best. And if the reward comes, it is well and good; and if it does not come, it is well and good also. That may do for him; for, unlike most preachers, I know that he practises what he preaches. But it is too much to ask the rest of

the world to practise it, and especially it is too much to ask *me*. There is nothing sublimated about me: I am practical to the tips of my fingers. My experience tells me that the world bows down and worships money. Now, I have that here" — she grasped her round white throat — "which can compel it to pour that money out at my feet; and shall I not take all that I can gain and use the power which it gives me?"

"If you are careful to use it for high ends — yes."

"What are high ends? I fear we should never agree about that. I would like to see *you* with a fortune, so as to discover what you would consider the proper uses for it."

"You will never see that," said Irma, simply; "and I am glad of it. The proper uses might be hard to find, and I might even grow to love the money for itself. But let us not talk of it any more, or you will think that I am not anxious for you to succeed in every way possible; and I am, in fact, so anxious that I would do anything to help you, if you needed help — which you do not. I know Signor Marchetti thinks the *impresarios* will be fighting for you as soon as they hear your voice. Where does he intend that you shall make your *début?*"

"Either in this city or in Milan. If it is in Milan, you must be there; that is understood."

Irma started, and the shadow of thoughts which she had for a time forgotten fell again over her face.

"Ah!" she replied, with a sigh, "that will not be possible. I have some news too, but not so good as yours. We are going, papa and I, to America."

Camilla raised herself in her chair with an expression of profound astonishment.

"What! You are going to America! Why, I thought your father disliked the country!"

"So he does," answered Irma; "but it is not for pleasure that he is going. His health is not good, and the doctors have said that an ocean voyage may benefit him. Then a cousin whom he once knew intimately has written that he would like to see him, and so we have decided to go."

"When?"

"Very soon, I trust, — as soon as we can get ready."

"*Mon Dieu!*" Camilla sat staring at her. "I feel as if the pillars of the world were giving way. Oh, what shall I do without you and the dear father! And if you are gone, who will there be to witness and enjoy my triumph?"

"*Tout le monde,*" said Irma, smiling; "and the *maestro* in especial."

"As if *tout le monde,* and the *maestro* besides, could make up for the absence of the only people I care for or who care for me! When will you come back?"

"I cannot tell. It will depend on papa's health." Despite herself, Irma's tone conveyed a hint of the fear which filled her soul, — the dark fear she endeavored to drive away, but which would not depart. "Nothing is certain," she added, "except that we are going."

"But this is strange news of your father's ill health. I thought him perfectly well."

"So did I — until last night. Then suddenly,

while we were talking together, he had an attack of illness — Oh, Camilla, I thought that he would die before my eyes! And when he grew better he told me that he had been to a doctor; that he is very ill, and that for this reason he is going to America, the ocean voyage and rest having been prescribed for him. My heart stood still to hear — and to see him! Like a flash of lightning the conviction came to me that God is going to take him from me. Since then I have tried to overcome this feeling — to hope that he is not so ill — to believe that unceasing watchfulness will keep off these awful attacks; but all the time there is something like a wild beast tearing at me; I know that it is fear — fear of the worst — "

"No, no!" cried Camilla, springing up, and throwing her arms about the other, "you must not listen to that fear — you must have hope and courage. Oh, it cannot be serious! God will not take him, who is all you have in the world!"

It was what Irma had said to herself but a short time before, yet now that the words came from the lips of another they seemed to have less power to reassure. An instinct whispered the sad truth that no human need is a shield against invincible Death, a reason for hoping that his dart may be lowered when once raised to strike. She put up her hand and pushed back the dark, clustering curls from her brow. It was a familiar gesture with her when troubled or disturbed.

"*Lasciamo fare a Dio!*" she said. "That is all I can do — leave things to God, and try to be brave and hopeful. Now, Camilla *mia*, is it not time for

you to keep your appointment? You must not let me detain you, and indeed I cannot stay longer. I come only to tell you that we are going away. Hereafter I shall not leave my father, so you must come to see us and tell us all your news. I shall be anxious to hear if the *impresarios* are as much impressed as we expect, and shall not be surprised if they fall upon each other and fight a duel for the possession of you."

Camilla smiled, quickly regaining the cheerfulness of which nothing had power to deprive her very long.

"We shall see!" she said. "For myself, I have no fears. I suppose I ought to be trembling, but I feel triumphant and absolutely sure of complete success. Of course I shall come to see you and let you know as soon as anything is settled. But now you are right: I must hasten to the *maestro.* If I should make him wait he would be in an awful rage."

VI

A FORTNIGHT later a group was again gathered under the trees on the lawn of the house in Passy, composed of those who were the chief *amis de la maison.* There was the Abbé Ravoux, with his mingled air of the ecclesiastic and the man of the world, intellectual, polished; carrying in his aspect and manner all the aroma of the *salons*, together with what may be called the perfume of the cloister, — that fragrance caught from the

spiritual life which even the most worldly can recognize. There was Dufresne, with his strong, keen, bearded face and dry, cynical manner. There was Norbert, with his enthusiasms, and his dreams which had already begun to suffer some change from the atmosphere of the decadent society in which he found himself. And there was Camilla, with her superb self-confidence, and the dawn-like glow of her coming triumph shining, as it were, about her.

They were all come to bid the Darracotes, father and daughter, adieu; for it was settled that they would leave Paris the next day, and sail from Havre the day after. Such partings are always sad; for in our life of change and chance what assurance have those that part that they will ever meet again?

But this parting would have been especially so, from the knowledge present in the thoughts of each of the danger overshadowing their friend and host, had not the latter by his cheerful animation rendered sadness impossible. He was indeed looking so well, and was in such good spirits, as he had been for a fortnight past, that Irma almost entirely put away fear regarding his health. Seeing him before her eyes apparently untouched by disease, how was it possible for her to believe in the danger, of which she had obtained only one startling glimpse? And so she herself was in radiant spirits, — spirits which her friends remembered afterward with many pangs of pity, — notwithstanding the fact that on the morrow she was to leave her home of many years, and turn her face toward a land of which she knew nothing.

But for the shock of fear and anxiety which

she had suffered, this would have been to her a very painful necessity; for the love of change and wandering had never been developed in her, while, on the contrary, her local attachments were strong and deep. But having suffered that horrible anxiety beside which everything else was dwarfed into insignificance, she thought only of the possibly beneficial effect of the change upon her father's health, and was eager that it should be tried. Therefore she had hastened all their preparations; they were now ready for departure; and their passage was taken in the great steamer which would sail from Havre within the next two days.

So, for the last time, the little group of intimates gathered in the familiar spot, which had witnessed so many such gatherings, to bid them *bon voyage.* But, as if by common consent, the subject of departure was avoided, and the talk had been for the most part light and gay, such as suited the golden summer evening still shining all about them with its radiance and charm.

Yet there was one heart on which the pain of parting lay so heavily that the sunshine had for it no radiance and no charm. To Norbert it was impossible to imagine how life would go on after the face which made sunshine for him had passed out of it; for he knew well that in this parting there was more than the usual element of uncertainty. Apart from the condition of Mr. Darracote's health, of which he did not think very much, the instinct of the lover told him that a girl so beautiful would hardly go out into the world with an unsafeguarded heart and return as she had gone — if, indeed, she returned

at all. And he knew well that this heart was unsafeguarded as far as any response to his passion was concerned. He had not seen Irma alone for a moment since their parting in the studio; but Mr. Darracote had startled him by walking in upon him the next day and had settled his fate by a few kind but decided words.

"Understand," he said in conclusion, "that I do not object to your coming to my house in the manner to which you have been accustomed — in fact, I should be sorry if you did not come; but if you come, it must be on the distinct condition that you do not trouble my daughter with any further love-making. She does not respond to your sentiment, of that I think you must have assured yourself. But she likes you, she is easily touched to compassion, and there is no doubt she could readily be led to bind herself in a manner which she would be certain to regret when wider knowledge of life gives her a knowledge of herself which she does not possess now."

The young man flushed painfully.

"I hope," he said, "that you do not think I am capable of wishing her to bind herself in any manner that she would be likely to regret?"

"No," Mr. Darracote answered; "I am sure you would not do so — knowingly. But youth is selfish and passion is blind, and I recognize, both in your character and in hers, possibilities which might lead to one of those tragic mistakes that, without apparent fault on either side, often wreck human lives. But I am determined to allow no opportunity for anything of the kind. The situation is plain.

Irma has none of the feeling for you that you desire. If you are sufficiently convinced of this, and strong enough in self-control to meet her on the old friendly ground, why, come as heretofore. But if you cannot do this — if you cannot trust yourself — then it is better that you should stay away. I cannot permit her to be tormented nor her pity worked upon. If you come, you must promise that there shall be no more love-making."

"Do you mean that I am to bind myself indefinitely?" Norbert asked slowly.

"No," Mr. Darracote replied; "I will only ask you to bind yourself during the time which remains before our departure for America. That is not long."

"*That* may not be long," Norbert returned; "but the time which will follow, — the time of separation from her, — how long will that be?"

He did not understand the sadness which gathered in the eyes so kindly yet keenly regarding him.

"That," Gilbert Darracote answered, "God only knows. But after we have left France I lay no embargo on you. In the future, if you desire to do so, you may seek her and try your fortune again; but at the present time I will have no more of a subject which only disturbs and distresses her. If you agree to this, come to us as often as you like; if not, my door must be closed to you."

It is almost needless to say that, given the situation as Norbert perceived it, — to wit, that Mr. Darracote was right in his assertion that Irma did not respond to his feeling, and that consequently to insist upon pressing it on her would only serve the

end of shutting himself out from her presence without any compensation at all, — it was not surprising that he gave the pledge asked of him, and so continued to hold his place in that inner circle of friends who found their way to the Passy house.

To Irma her father simply said:

"I have spoken to that foolish boy, and he will not annoy you again. Make no difference in your manner to him when he comes next."

The girl opened her eyes.

"Why should I make any difference?" she asked. "I am glad you spoke to him, and that he will not talk so again; for it is painful — it makes me sad. But for anything else, I do not think of it."

And this was quite true — so true that at his next visit Norbert clearly recognized that indeed she did "not think of it." There was no consciousness in her manner, nor in her glance when it met his; for the simple reason that a greater emotion had entirely swept out of her thoughts his avowal and all that it implied. The young man was deeply stung by this indifference, and yet there was a certain comfort in it. Psyche had not wakened yet, but might it not be at last his happy privilege to waken her?

This was the dream which kept him from despair, — a dream which almost every lover cherishes so long as there is no "other" in the case. But it was not able to save him from the pang which was tearing his heart as he sat under the green shade of the chestnuts and devoured with his eyes (not knowing how they told his story to every one) the lovely face, full at once of enchanting brightness and enchant-

ing softness, which was soon to vanish from his sight.

"Don't look so *triste*," Camilla said to him. "Do you not see that we are all making an effort to be gay? It is to keep up *their* spirits, especially poor Irma's. If we followed our inclination, we should probably all look as melancholy as you do; but, I ask you now, would that be very cheerful?"

He could not but smile.

"Possibly not," he said; "but if you think that I am not making any effort, you are mistaken. I assure you that if I followed *my* inclination I should look much more melancholy than I do."

"But what is the good of it?" she demanded. "Nobody will miss the dear people so much as I — What! you don't believe it?"

Norbert, who had been betrayed into an expression of incredulity, was obliged to own that he did not.

"Candidly," he said, "I think that I shall miss them a great deal more; for, without discussing any possible difference of quality in our regard, it is very certain that I am not about to be absorbed in a *début* which is to electrify the world."

"And it does not occur to you that one would like a little sympathy at such a time," she returned; "that it will be rather hard to have nobody at all to feel a personal interest in one's triumph. Do you suppose that, although you are desperately in love with Irma — *ma foi!* a bat could see that, — you will really miss her as much as I shall?"

"I think," he replied uncompromisingly, "that, by comparison, you will not miss her at all. You

confess that yours is only a selfish desire for some one to sympathize with you in your triumph; but for me — I don't at all care who knows it, — the sun will go out of the world when she is gone. I am afraid even to think of the desolation which is before me, and I am sure it will be as much as I can do to avoid drowning myself."

Camilla regarded him with a rather inscrutable expression in her bright brown eyes. He was very much of an enigma to her, for the men with whom her experience had acquainted her were of a very different type, but she had always been conscious of a certain attractive quality in him.

"Don't do that!" she said. "Think of the unpleasantness of the morgue! Besides, '*quand on est mort, c'est pour longtemps.*' Whereas, if you remain alive, there is nothing that I am aware of to prevent your seeing her again."

"Ah!" he answered, drawing in his breath sharply; "but who can tell how — or where?"

The Abbé Ravoux overheard the words and turned toward him.

"Monsieur Norbert," he said, in his gentle, high-bred voice, "those are questions which a wise man does not ask, because he knows that to answer them is impossible; and a Christian does not ask them, because he knows that the future is in the hand of God."

The young man lifted his glance to the dark, clear-cut face, at once so winning and so commanding.

"But suppose that one has the misfortune to be neither, Monsieur l'Abbé?" he said. "What then?

And, honestly, why should it lessen the fear of calamity to believe that it may come from the hand of God? Would one suffer from it the less on that account?"

"A childish question!" said the Abbé. "Forgive me!" — as Norbert flushed — "I was not thinking so much of you as of the widespread childishness which asks such questions. See, my friend! would you perceive no difference if a surgeon cut off your arm without cause, or if he cut it off to save your whole body from death?"

"Metaphors are misleading, Monsieur l'Abbé. The difference lies in this, — one would know what the surgeon had in view."

"I grant that one must exercise a little faith with regard to what *le bon Dieu* has in view when He operates upon us," the Abbé responded, smiling. "But it does not require a very heroic degree of that virtue to believe that a wisdom incomparably higher than our own orders all things for ends so far-reaching that we are unable to perceive them."

Dufresne here turned to the speaker.

"You may not consider that a very heroic degree of faith is required for such a belief," he said; "but to me it appears so heroic as to be impossible. How is a man to believe in 'ends so far-reaching that it is impossible to perceive them'?"

"By applying the simplest principles governing that which he knows to that which he does not know," the Abbé answered. "There is not a man who has lived anything beyond a mere animal existence who will not acknowledge that everything which he possesses of value in his character and

everything he knows of true wisdom he has learned through things which seemed hardest to him and against which perhaps he rebelled most strongly. It is the old illustration of the potter and the clay. While we murmur, a divine hand is forming us for uses of which we know little, but which even in this life it is given us sometimes to recognize."

Dufresne growled something inarticulate, which might be taken for protest; but Gilbert Darracote nodded assent.

"It is true," he said. "Do you remember the player in the 'Purgatorio,' who lingers after the game is over, sadly repeating his throws and 'learning by his losses'? Not even Dante ever touched a deeper truth. It is from our losses and our griefs that we learn all that is best worth knowing for life, or — for death."

A moment's silence fell on the group. It was the first note of earnestness that had been sounded in their talk, the first outward sign of the underlying sadness in all their minds. At another time Dufresne's protest would have become speedily articulate; but as it was, no one spoke: no one dared contradict the man who, standing in the shadow of possible death, declared that what he had learned in life best worth knowing he had, like Dante's player, learned through his losses and his griefs.

Presently Camilla rose.

"It is hard to tear one's self away," she observed, "but for me there is no alternative. The *maestro* is to bring the *impresario* from Milan to see me this evening, and we are to arrange final terms, so that the contract may be drawn up. Ah, my

friends, my friends, why are you going away just now?"

"For one thing, because you have no further need of us, Camilla," said Mr. Darracote, patting gently the hand she laid on his arm. "You will soon be a famous singer, and the most rose-lined path of success in all the world will open before you. What could we do but mingle our *bravas* with all the others that will greet you?"

"What could you do? You could keep me sane and sober," the girl answered, with a sudden flash of wisdom. "It is for that one needs a friend. Oh, I shall have flatterers enough, but any one to say, 'Camilla, be wise! Remember you are but a little Italian nightingale singing for an hour to amuse these who listen; but when you can no longer sing, what will they care for you?' — there will be no one to say that to me."

"But since you are capable of saying it to yourself, Mademoiselle," remarked Dufresne, "why should you need some one else to hold the burning flax before you and cry, *Sic transit gloria mundi?*"

"Because, Monsieur, the incense of praise is like wine: it mounts to the head," she answered, with a charming candor. "And I cannot trust myself to remember always the burning flax."

"If the incense mounts to your head, it will not stay there," said Darracote, smiling. "I have no fear of that: the head is too wise, the heart is too true. So go out into the world and sing like a true nightingale of our Italy. And my blessing go with you."

With a quick, graceful movement she bent her head and kissed his hand.

"You give me," she said, "the blessing my father is not here to give. And now I will go with a light heart to meet the *impresario*. This is not good-bye, you know; for I shall be here to-morrow morning to see you off. Meanwhile Irma is coming with me for an hour or two."

"I shall be gone but a short time, papa," interposed Irma. "Camilla insists that I must witness her triumph over the *impresario* as the keynote of all her triumphs to come."

"There is no reason why you should hasten to return," said her father. "I shall not be lonely, since our friends here will no doubt remain with me."

But Norbert also rose, saying:

"I must return to Paris, and if I might be permitted to attend —"

But Dufresne's hand fell on his arm.

"Will you never forget, *mon ami*," he said, "that you are not in that fortunate country of yours, where *les demoiselles* are attended in public by young men and no one finds it remarkable? Here in Paris we are not so Arcadian in our habits and thoughts. It is I who must of necessity take leave, who will, together with the good Margherita, accompany them as far as their destination."

Norbert looked at once abashed and rebellious. "I thought," he said, "that we were Bohemians and therefore not bound by the rules of great people and *bourgeois?*"

"Every young woman is bound by certain rules,

unless she wishes to become Bohemian in a sense which these young ladies certainly do not," replied the painter. "*Assez!* Stay you here, for I *must* go; and Mademoiselle Irma does not, I know, wish her father left alone."

"Yes," said Irma, in a quick aside, "stay, I beg! I do not know what engagements Monsieur l'Abbé may have which will take him away before my return, and Margherita must go with me. So, unless it inconveniences you — "

"Don't you know that I would inconvenience myself to any degree to do you the least service?" he interrupted. "Of course I will stay — as long as you wish. Don't hasten to return."

He was fully rewarded by her smile of thanks; and when she went away, a few minutes later, she turned at the gate to send another smile back at the group sitting in the soft evening light under the trees. Would she ever forget the picture — her father waving his pipe with a gesture of gay farewell to Dufresne, the Abbé sitting beside him, Norbert leaning back in his chair and gazing wistfully after them? Such a familiar picture; but, after she had passed out of the gate, never to be seen again, save by the sad light of memory, in all the years of time.

Two hours later, as she was coming with Margherita out of the house near the Place de l'Étoile, Norbert suddenly stood before her; and one glance at his white, agitated face was enough to warn her of the news he brought. Before he could speak, she caught his arm.

"My father?" she gasped.

Norbert put his other arm around her as a brother might have done.

"He is ill," he said gently; "and I have come for you. Be brave! I have a carriage here. We shall reach Passy in a few moments."

She made only one moan, "Oh, why did I leave him?" and then, without another word, suffered him to hurry her into the waiting carriage, which at once drove off rapidly.

A terrible instinct of the truth kept her from asking any questions; but if there was any hope in her heart, it died absolutely when she saw the face of the Abbé Ravoux as he stood awaiting her in the garden gate, out of which she had passed so short a time before. In the sorrowful compassion of that countenance she read the full confirmation of her worst fear.

"Yes, my child," said the gentle, fatherly voice, in reply to the mute interrogation of her look; "God has called him. But he did not pass away before I had time to give him the absolution of the dying; and he was, as you know, well prepared for the summons."

"He has *gone* — while I was absent — without a word of farewell!" she cried in a voice of agony. "Ah, why did I leave him! But I thought he was better. Monsieur l'Abbé, something must have occurred — something excited him — something which I might have prevented had I been here."

"No," said the Abbé; "do not torment yourself with such thoughts. Nothing occurred which you could have prevented. We were still talking, as

you left us; and he was saying that but for your sake he would never undertake a journey from which he so greatly shrank, when the *facteur* brought a letter. He did not read it for some time, but at length he said: '*Eh, bien!* this is from America, so I will see what it contains.' He opened it, and after a few minutes looked up at me. There was a grave, troubled look on his face which I shall never forget. 'Monsieur l'Abbé,' he said, 'I need your prayers. I have inherited a great fortune.' I began to offer some laughing congratulations, when suddenly I saw his face change. I knew that it could mean but one thing. I sprang to my feet and gave him the absolution. He understood, glanced at me gratefully, and died. My child, my child, do not grieve so! Only think of the goodness of God. With but a single pang, he has left behind the body of this death: passed from all that he feared and dreaded, from a weight that would have been too great for him, into the blessing forever promised to the poor in spirit and the pure of heart."

BOOK III

THE WINGS OF EROS

I

"AND so the Darracote heiress has at last appeared — materialized, one may say, since she has been no more than a name heretofore. Tell us something about her, Mr. Hastings, — do!"

The speaker, a very fashionable-looking woman, held out a cup of tea, in a much beringed hand, to Hastings as she spoke; and her words hushed the chatter of a group of persons who were gathered around her tea-table. They all stopped talking, as if a subject of universal interest had been touched; and all looked at Hastings. He, on his part, looked at his hostess with a smile.

"What can I tell you, Mrs. Farrell?" he asked. "I have not seen her myself. I know from good evidence that she has arrived, but she is no more than a name to me yet."

"You have not seen her!" cried Mrs. Farrell, almost incredulously. "Why, she has been at Argyle for several days, has she not?"

"She arrived with Mrs. Treherne last Thursday."

"Then — forgive me if I am inquisitive, but we are all immensely interested, you know — how does it happen that you have not seen her, you who have

the claim of such long and intimate friendship with her — uncle, was n't he? "

"Only her cousin. But even if the relationship had been nearer, you must remember that he was no more than a name to her, and that *I* am hardly even that. Therefore when I called soon after her arrival, and Mrs. Treherne excused her on the plea of still feeling the effects of her voyage, I had no right to be surprised. So, like the rest of the world, I must wait until she is pleased to manifest herself."

"But you can tell us something about her, Mr. Hastings," said a girl with masses of red-brown hair under a graceful picture-hat. "One hears so many contradictory things. Is it true that she is a wonderful singer, and that she was about to appear on the operatic stage when Mr. Darracote died and the fortune came to her?"

"Or is it true that, being an ardent Catholic, she wanted to enter a convent, and that she will convert Argyle into a religious house and perhaps found an order?" supplemented another voice.

"Or is she engaged to a young artist in Paris, — unknown, but excessively clever, — and will she marry him, and devote her fortune to his theories of art?" inquired another lady, leaning forward out of a dusky corner, so that the firelight played on her thin, delicate face, full of animation and refinement.

"And, finally," chimed in a masculine voice, "is it true that her father was a half-insane sculptor, who married a model of the Quartier Latin?"

Hastings calmly finished his cup of tea before replying to any of these questions. Then his glance of satiric amusement swept the circle.

"May I inquire," he said, "where this large and very varied information concerning Miss Darracote comes from?"

"I can tell you," said Mrs. Farrell, with a laugh. "It all comes from the American colony in Paris. They — I mean the members of the colony — had never heard of Miss Darracote until Eleanor Treherne introduced her to a few people last summer. Since then everybody who comes back from the other side brings a new story about her. You 'll all confess" — her glance, like Hastings', swept the group — "that you heard these things in Paris, or from somebody who has been in Paris this summer?"

"Why, of course," said Lucia Wynne, the girl of the picture-hat. "Where else should they come from? I was n't in Paris myself this summer, but numbers of my friends were, and they all say there were many stories afloat regarding this mysterious heiress, but nobody really *knew* anything about her. But you must know something, Mr. Hastings, something accurate; so please make haste and tell us."

"But I have already told you that, like the American colony in Paris, I have never seen her," Hastings replied, with an air of provoking reserve.

"But you know the real facts about her," observed the lady in the shadowy corner; "and, since you hear what contradictory stories are afloat, I think you owe it to her to tell these facts."

"Yes, Hastings," chimed in the masculine voice which had spoken before; "you should really feel it a conscientious obligation to gratify our curiosity."

Hastings paid no attention to the last speaker — a tall, loosely built young man, with a long, clean-

shaven face, clever, conceited, ugly, and attractive all at once, — who was lounging in a low chair beside the lady in the corner; but directed his reply to the latter.

"Probably you are right, Mrs. Lawton. It does seem a little hard that so many absurdities should be afloat about one unoffending young woman; and yet it is almost a pity to destroy romances which prove so much bold inventiveness on the part of those who invented them. I am afraid, too, that the facts for which you ask will sound very tame."

"Nevertheless, let us have them," said Mrs. Farrell. "If they are tame, they will not be the better for being so long delayed."

"Briefly, then," said Hastings, "the young lady in question is the daughter of the cousin to whom our old friend, Mr. Darracote, left the bulk of his fortune, — a sculptor, who from his earliest youth lived abroad. He must have possessed great talent, perhaps even genius; but he was so eccentric as to care very little, or not at all, for fame or for making money. Hence one perceives the natural outgrowth of the opinion, repeated by Rapier here, that he was 'half-insane.'"

"What else could one call a man who did not care either for fame or for money?" inquired Rapier. "If the rest of what we have heard comes as near the truth, I can't perceive much 'bold inventiveness' in the stories."

"He married," Hastings went on, ignoring the interruption, "an Italian lady, who died early, leaving this daughter to whom he was devoted. They lived, I believe, very much in seclusion, with only certain

artistic and what we would call Bohemian associations; so it is not surprising that the American colony did not know them. I have never heard that the daughter had either musical or religious ambitions. She was, however, very deeply attached to her father; and his sudden death — he died of heart disease just after reading the letter giving the news of his inheritance — was such a shock and grief to her that it was found necessary to divert her mind and restore her health by several months of travel before she could come over and take possession of her kingdom. The executors of Mr. Darracote's will asked Mrs. Treherne to go and take charge of her, and Mrs. Treherne went." There was a moment's pause. "I think," the speaker added reflectively, "that is all I know."

"It was a great opportunity for Eleanor Treherne," said Mrs. Farrell, leaning back in her chair. "It seemed at first as if she had been left entirely out in the cold, as far as the Darracote fortune was concerned — for what is a paltry fifteen hundred a year to *her?* But fate has interposed in her favor. She is back at Argyle, with her social prestige not only unimpaired, but heightened by having an heiress to bring out, a girl without social experience or social connections, who will be, no doubt, like wax in her hands. It is a situation full of possibilities for a clever woman, and Eleanor is a very clever woman."

"Yes," said Lucia Wynne, after a silence which no one else seemed disposed to break. "There is no doubt that Mrs. Treherne is very clever, but do you think she will *like* having an heiress to bring out? One can't fancy Mrs. Treherne sinking into a chaperon — can one exactly?"

She, in turn, glanced around the circle of fire-lit figures, — for the winter afternoon was closing in, — and a low, general laugh answered her.

"I am quite sure," said Mrs. Lawton, her thin, delicate face and fair hair standing out more effectively than ever against the gathering shadows, "that we need not trouble ourselves to fancy Mrs. Treherne sinking into a chaperon; for she is not in the least likely to do anything of the kind. If the heiress is not of remarkable material, she will play a very subordinate second part to Eleanor Treherne's first, or else the association will quickly end."

"You mean that Mrs. Treherne will never bear being overshadowed?" asked Rapier — who, for all his boyish looks, was a writer of ability and considerable reputation, — glancing up at the prophetess.

She began to draw her furs around her shoulders, and did not answer for a moment. Then she said carelessly:

"I mean that I have known Eleanor Treherne all my life, and I have never known her play a second part to any one under any circumstances; and it is 'by the past one shadows forth the future,' is n't it?"

"Quite so," he answered, laughing. "The question, therefore, is, what will that unknown quantity, the heiress, prove to be? Will she be content to play the second part for which you have cast her? By the by, Hastings, the only story you forgot to dispose of was the story of the artist lover. Are we to have no information on that point?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Hastings!" cried Lucia Wynne. "That is the most interesting point of all. Tell us, is it true? — has she an artist lover?"

"My dear Miss Wynne, what a question!" said Hastings. "What should I know of Miss Darracote's love affairs? She may have a dozen artist lovers, for aught I know. I can only say that, if so, nothing has officially transpired respecting any one of them."

"Officially transpired!" repeated the girl. "I suppose I am very rude to be so pressing, but — has nothing transpired unofficially?"

"Ah! there I confess that you ask more than I am able to answer. How can I tell what confidences may have been given — unofficially? I can only assure you that, if so, none of those confidences have reached me."

"Then we may be sure that none have been given," said Mrs. Farrell, with decision. "Eleanor Treherne would never have kept such interesting information to herself."

"Probably not," returned Hastings. He rose as he spoke and held out his hand to his hostess. "I hope that when I see you again I may be able to give more satisfactory information concerning the heiress," he said; "I am aware that I have been altogether unsatisfactory this afternoon."

"Well, he *was* unsatisfactory," Lucia Wynne remarked after he had passed from the room. "But perhaps he could not help it. I suppose that he told us all that he really knew."

She looked as if for assent at Mrs. Farrell, but that lady wore a doubtful aspect.

"Impossible to say," she answered. "He is rather a strange person, Gerard Hastings. I have never known him tell anything which he did not wish to

tell. In other words, one can never surprise him into an indiscretion."

This seemed to be also the opinion of Mrs. Lawton, who had taken leave at the same time as Hastings, and whom he was at that moment putting into her carriage at the door.

"You were very discreet," she said to him. "How is it that you missed your vocation in life? You should have been a diplomatist, Mr. Hastings. Apparent frankness and real reticence — is n't that the diplomatic ideal?"

"You are very kind," he responded, holding for a moment the hand she offered him. "If every one were like yourself, frankness might become real and reticence would be unnecessary."

"I am afraid that is diplomatic flattery," she said. "But there is something I want to say to you." She hesitated an instant, then lifted to his face a pair of gray eyes as clear and candid as the soul they mirrored. "You told us very little about the heiress," she went on; "but what you did tell made me feel sorry for her. It seems absurd, perhaps, to be sorry for one for whom the world is opening so brilliantly. But she seems very desolate — to have lost by death all that she possessed, and to have now no friend but Eleanor Treherne — " She paused again, and he saw that a crystal mist had risen to her eyes, as if at the image her own words evoked. "The point is this," she added. "If I can be of any service to her, I want you to promise to let me know. It would give me real happiness if I could help her in any manner in this new, strange life she has entered upon."

"I give the promise with the greatest pleasure,"

Hastings replied earnestly. "And I understand the kindness which prompts you to make such an offer. I have not seen Miss Darracote as yet, and I really told the truth in saying that I know nothing except the outside facts of her life. Her position at present is pathetic or enviable according to the light by which she regards it. When I know something of that light, will you let me come and tell you about her? I promise that I will not be diplomatic at all."

"Come, certainly," she said eagerly. "I shall expect your report with the greatest interest. And, now, can't I set you down somewhere?"

He declined and drew back, lifting his hat as the carriage rolled away. Then, as he walked down the street, he said to himself that it was like Clare Lawton to have taken such a view of the position of this young heiress whom all the world was envying. She — the possessor of those clear, sad gray eyes — knew how little wealth and luxury could do to fill a lonely life or soothe an aching heart. Ten years before, when the husband whom she idolized had been taken from her in the second year of their married life, the world had prophesied speedy consolation for one so young and so richly endowed with the gifts of fortune; but now even the most worldly recognized that for her there would be no second story. She had at last emerged from long seclusion and taken her place again in society; but there was a line drawn around her which even the dullest felt and which the boldest might not pass. It was as if she only touched the life amid which she moved with the surface of her being, while her inner self had its existence far away, in some other and very different region. Now and

again, however, to those who knew her best a glimpse of this self was vouchsafed; and such a glimpse Hastings felt had been given to him just now.

And, strange to say, — yet not strange, perhaps, in view of the selfishness of human nature, — her words roused in him the first real thought which he had given to the girl at Argyle. He had, of course, thought of her, and thought much, as a possibility, a pawn in his game of life; but of *herself*, without relation to his interest, he had not thought at all. And yet the few cold and unsympathetic words which he had spoken regarding her had so touched Mrs. Lawton as to bring the lovely mist of tears, which he recalled as something altogether unexpected and exquisite, to her eyes when she spoke of the picture they suggested. Now he, too, perceived that it was indeed pathetic, the position of this girl, inheriting wealth at the same moment that she inherited sorrow; bereft of her only parent, a stranger in a strange land; the object solely of interested speculation to all around her, and with Eleanor Treherne for her only friend!

And who knew better than himself how much pathos the last touch added! Who had ever more thoroughly gauged that nature, at once so hard, so light, so mercenary, and so insincere, with such depth of selfishness, such shallowness of feeling! What irony of fate to send this woman to the side of the motherless girl at the moment when a new life was opening for her, to make her the guide for the young spirit entering on an unknown world! It seemed to Hastings that Clare Lawton's word of insight and sympathy had suddenly opened his eyes.

"It is the last thing Mr. Darracote would have desired," he thought, with a passing emotion of self-reproach for the forgetfulness of his old friend — the friend who had dealt so generously by him — into which he had fallen. Nothing certainly had been farther from *his* intention than that Mrs. Treherne should remain virtual mistress of Argyle, with a pliant, inexperienced girl in her hands to sway and bend to her will and her interest. And yet he, Hastings, had allowed this thing to happen for lack of a word spoken in time! He remembered that he had felt contemptuously indifferent when it was proposed by the executors of Mr. Darracote's will to send Mrs. Treherne over to France to take charge of the desolate young heiress. Let her have a little more profit out of the connection, had been the thought in his mind, — what difference did it make? When the heiress came he would act as pleased him. Meanwhile Mrs. Treherne, who was, with all her faults, an accomplished woman of the world, could be employed to give the right *cachet* to this crude girl from Bohemia.

And when the other day she had made difficulties with regard to his seeing Miss Darracote, he had merely smiled to himself at the folly which fancied she could frustrate his will when he chose to exert it. Just then he was indolent, indifferent, a little averse, if the truth be told, to meeting one in whom personally he felt not the slightest interest. So he had allowed the matter to pass, secure in the certainty that whenever he pleased to see the heiress he would see her, let Mrs. Treherne say or think what she pleased. But now—

Well, now a word, a touch, had come, and he suddenly saw that he must rouse himself. For the sake of his old friend if for no other reason, he must see the girl whom his awakened fancy painted as a figure so lonely and so pathetic amid the new splendors of her lot. And after he had seen her he would know what course to take with Eleanor Treherne.

II

THE next day, having come out for a few hours to the cottage, where he did not live at this season, Hastings prepared to go to Argyle by the private path across the grounds, which he knew so well and had so often followed.

It was a crisp, clear, but not very cold winter day; the pale blue sky and pale sunshine full of the sense of nature's lessened energy, yet with a certain charm for one able to perceive it. The same charm was to be felt in the wide grounds of Argyle, in the ordered care which pervaded every part of them, together with the complete absence of any color save the deep, sombre green of the pines and firs, and the long lines of evergreen hedges enclosing spaces where at another season luxuriant bloom rioted, but where now not a flower blossomed or leaf budded. The delicate tracery of bare boughs stood out with the clearness which is one of the most exquisite effects in a winter landscape, against the pale sky, where in summer were masses of rich foliage and depths of inviting shade; and the cold gray-green tint of the wide stretches of sward conveyed

the same suggestion of suspended force, of life resting but not dead. It was a scene in which everything was toned to a low key, and yet full of a deeply penetrating beauty.

As Hastings passed along the familiar paths, he was conscious of this subtle and austere charm; but he was not prepared to come suddenly upon a figure which was altogether in harmony with it. Turning a corner in a part of the gardens most thickly set with shrubbery, he saw before him a sheltered nook filled with the afternoon sunlight; and, seated on a rustic bench placed against a great clump of evergreens, a girl dressed in deep mourning, her eyes bent upon a book which lay open on her lap, while one hand strayed unconsciously to and fro over the upturned head of a beautiful collie beside her. The low, level gold of the sunlight fell over the slender form in its sable dress, bringing its delicate grace into strong relief against the deep-green background; and instinctively Hastings paused, as if he had strayed into a privacy where he had no right to intrude. Charmed, attracted, he hesitated, — reluctant to advance, still more unwilling to retire. It is possible, however, that he would have retired, had not his hesitation been ended by the unabsorbed member of the group. The dog, catching the sound of a footstep, turned his head with a quick movement. The next instant he bounded forward, eager to greet a friend.

"There, Rex! — there, good doggie!" said Hastings, endeavoring to subdue the ardor of this greeting. And then putting the dog aside with one hand, he lifted his hat with the other, as he advanced to

where the lady sat, motionless with surprise, her eyes raised from her book.

"I am sure," he said, "that I have the pleasure of seeing Miss Darracote. My name is Hastings. May I hope that you have heard of me?"

If he expected some loss of self-possession on her part from his sudden appearance, he found himself mistaken, for her manner could not have been more unembarrassed had he been the most familiar of visitors. She rose to her feet.

"Yes," she answered, "I have heard of Mr. Hastings as a friend of my cousin, Mr. Darracote."

"That old friendship," said Hastings, "and the fact that I am your next neighbor, must plead my excuse for this intrusion. I have been so long accustomed to approaching Argyle by this private way that I have perhaps forgotten that with the reign of a new sovereign privileges fall into abeyance, unless graciously renewed."

"I should be sorry for you to think that any such privilege needed renewal," she said. "Your old friendship surely gives you a right here."

"Not at all," he replied quickly. "My old friendship gives me no rights here — only, as I have said, some privileges, if you are kind enough to recognize them."

"I am very glad to recognize them," she answered, her soft, dark eyes meeting him as she spoke with the most direct gaze. "The last thing which I could possibly wish to do would be to destroy for any one any link of affection or memory with the past. I am glad you have come to Argyle in the manner you have always been accustomed to come."

"You are more than kind," he returned. "I, too, am glad, since it has enabled me to — shall I say, surprise your acquaintance?"

"Why should you fancy it was necessary to surprise it?" she asked with something of the same emotion in her tone.

"Only because I was disappointed in seeing you when I called the other day, and as you are certainly 'out,' in more than the conventional sense at present, I might have been equally unfortunate to-day, if I had approached the door of Argyle from the direction proper for visitors."

Miss Darracote smiled. "It is possible," she admitted, "that might have been the result, since I left no word where I was to be found. And you would have been doubly disappointed, for Mrs. Treherne is not at home this afternoon."

"I did not come to see Mrs. Treherne," said Hastings, more bluntly than he often spoke. "I came to see yourself, and I should have been deeply disappointed if for the second time I had failed to see you."

"Then it is fortunate that you chanced to come this way, or that Rex perceived you," she said. "And now we will go in."

"I dislike very much to take you in — only, really, I fear that it is not prudent to sit out-doors in this climate at this season. You are not in Italy, you know."

"Alas! I know very well," she said with a slight sigh. "But even here I like to be out of doors when it is not too cold. Sitting in the sunshine was pleasant, though perhaps not prudent. At all

events, I will not ask you to sit down with me. Come, Rex!"

The dog bounded to her side, pushing his nose up into her hand as he did so for a caress; and, glancing at him, Hastings said:

"I see that you have won the heart of at least one adherent of the past. This collie was Mr. Darracote's close companion and most faithful mourner. I was afraid that he would die of grief — dogs do, you know — and I tried to take him away. But, though he knows and likes me, he could not attach himself to me in the exclusive fashion that alone can satisfy the canine heart. I am glad that he has attached himself to you, and is therefore comforted."

"Yes; we made friends at once," Irma responded. "There was something of sympathy between us, no doubt. We were both lonely creatures."

A note of unconscious sadness in her voice struck Hastings' ear, and renewed that sense of pathos which had been first wakened within him by Mrs. Lawton's words. He seemed to see her arriving at the empty house, where only one faithful heart — and that a dog's — kept the memory of the master who had gone; and he fancied how the two, out of their very loneliness, found comfort together; for an instinct assured him clearly that there was more comfort to be found even in the love of a dog than in the companionship of Eleanor Treherne.

During the brief silence which followed he looked with critical intentness at his companion, and decided that the first impression conveyed to him by her presence — the impression of something alto-

gether exquisite and refined — was strengthened and deepened. Her beauty charmed his eye; but even more than her beauty he was struck with her air, as of one uplifted and remote from common and trivial things. It was not only that she moved without the faintest trace of self-consciousness, — that badge of inferior natures, as well as of inferior training, — but he read this aloofness of spirit in the direct glance of her eyes and the serene indifference of her manner.

It was not often that a woman possessed her quietude so unmoved in his presence. There was usually a flutter, a movement of interest of one kind or another. Even the most flattered women yielded to his vanity this involuntary homage, — a homage he had grown accustomed to expect, and the absence of which at present struck him with a surprise by no means agreeable. Evidently this girl from Bohemia found nothing in him to excite interest; for it was plain that her courtesy was purely perfunctory, and paid not to himself — Gerard Hastings — but to the old friend of the dead master of Argyle. Well, he must see if he could not move this quietude, if he could not rouse a thrill of interest. It should be easy to do so; and yet, glancing again at the delicate, high-bred face, he almost smiled to think that perhaps it was not so easy. The sense of difficulty, the consciousness of indifference, piqued him to an effort he might not else have made.

"I hope," he said, answering her last words, after a pause which was greater in his consciousness than in reality, "that you will not long be able to speak of yourself as lonely. There are, I assure you,

Miss Darracote, many friends here waiting to welcome you."

"Many possible acquaintances, perhaps," she replied, "but I doubt if there are any friends." Then, as if with a thought that this was not very gracious, she added quickly, "There is so much necessary for friendship in any real sense — sympathy of tastes and ideas, most of all."

"And do you despair of finding such sympathy?" Hastings asked.

"It would be an exaggeration to say that I despair, but I think it improbable that I shall find it," she returned quietly. "I have not been long in this new world, — I mean, the world of my new life, — but it has been long enough to learn that I have very little in common with those whom I meet."

"But is not your acquaintance in this world as yet extremely limited?"

"It is not very extended, but I fancy quite typical."

"Oh, if you make up your mind against us!" said Hastings, in a tone of protest. "But why should you do that? After all, people like each other for certain human qualities, rather than because they think alike on abstract subjects, — literature and art, for example."

"It is certainly not necessary for them to think alike on literature and art," she answered, "but there are many more important subjects on which it seems to me that agreement *is* necessary. For instance, the standards and objects of life — when people think very differently about those things,

there is a deep gulf between them which sympathy and comprehension cannot cross."

"The older I grow," said Hastings, who found himself a good deal astonished by the turn of the conversation, "the more firmly I believe that there are very few gulfs which sympathy and comprehension cannot cross."

"It may be that I stand convicted of imperfect sympathy, then," she said, smiling. "But, you see," — the note of unconscious pathos came again into her voice, — "the world of my old life was so different that no doubt I am badly spoiled. There I lived always in an atmosphere of sympathy, not only with my father, but with our friends. Of course we did not always think alike, — that would be very stupid, — but there is sympathy in difference when people think in the same way about essential matters, when they take interest in the same things, and have the same standards and objects in life."

"I readily understand," said Hastings, "that there is a very great difference between the world you have left and that which you have entered, and I also understand that these differences strike you with great force because you have stepped so immediately from the one into the other. It is not often," he added lightly, "that a princess of Thule comes to us, and I should like to know how our standards and objects appear to her."

The princess of Thule shook her head.

"You had better not ask," she said. "I am afraid that if I answer I shall seem very rude."

"If there is anything I value in life," he declared, "it is the candor which is sometimes incor-

rectly called rudeness. Besides, if you have any dreadful revelation to make, I shall have brought it on myself, and I may add that I am not at all thin-skinned."

"I have no dreadful revelation to make," she answered. "What strikes me in this world is simply that money seems to be the only object of worship, and amusement the only end of existence."

"A rather severe indictment."

"But is it not true?" she asked, turning toward him with a look so vivid that it impressed him with a sense of the dramatic possibilities of her beauty. "As you remind me, I have not met a great many people, but those whom I have met have talked in a manner to indicate that it is true."

"In a certain degree no doubt it is true," he conceded. "But may not pretty much the same thing be said of the rest of the world? If there are any Arcadias existing where men do not worship money, nor pursue pleasure, I confess that I have never found them."

"You may not believe me," she said, "but it is nevertheless true that I have spent all my life in such an Arcadia — if you like to call it so. In the world in which I have lived it is of no importance whether a man does or does not possess money. Superiority of genius is the only superiority recognized, and the man who uses his genius for purposes of money-making is held in contempt."

"The geniuses of whom you speak must preserve a very strict seclusion," said Hastings, in a tone of sarcasm very familiar to his friends, "for the world

does not credit artists generally with such high ideals or austere practices. It has been my good fortune to know many men of reputation in art and letters, but while I have frequently found them agreeable, I have never found them indifferent to the two great gods of the world of which you have spoken."

"That is very likely," she returned. "I have heard my father say that even among artists there is always such a class; but neither he nor his friends belonged to it. The world," said she, with an accent of delicate pride, "had no price with which to buy my father."

There was a moment's silence, for Hastings felt that the conversation had touched a point of such deep difference that unless he wished to be, perhaps irrevocably, included in the number of those with whom Miss Darracote had declared sympathy on her part to be impossible, he must make a diversion.

The opportunity to do so came as they emerged from the gardens, and saw before them the stately, picturesque mass of the house, set in the midst of its wide lawns, with its windows shining and twinkling in the level gold of the low sunlight.

"I have always thought this the best view of the house," he said. "What a beautiful place it is! Surely, Miss Darracote, there is some pleasure for you in feeling yourself mistress of anything so charming as Argyle?"

Irma's glance followed his own and dwelt for an instant on the picture before them. Then she said gently:

"Yes, it is a beautiful place. I never look at it without thinking that if one had any associations with it one might become deeply attached to it. But, you see, I have none. I look at it with the eyes of a stranger."

"The eyes of the owner can hardly be called those of a stranger," he said.

But as the eyes of which he spoke turned toward him, he read in their soft depths something which made him understand her meaning as she answered:

"I have no sense of being the owner, but only of being, as I have said, a stranger and an accident."

A few moments later they were entering the spacious hall, and Hastings was following Irma across it, not to the drawing-room, but to the library.

"I like this room so much better than any other in the house," she said, "that I have made it my sitting-room, and really feel at home in no other. Mrs. Treherne does not agree with me. She says that it is gloomy, but I do not think so."

A gleam of amusement shone in Hastings' eyes as he glanced around the apartment, with its rich, quiet tones and book-lined walls.

"It is not the kind of room I can imagine Mrs. Treherne liking," he replied, "but I have always thought it delightful. It was Mr. Darracote's room, and I may safely say the only one in which he felt at home."

"Ah! that accounts for it — the difference, I mean," said the girl, as she advanced toward the open fire, which made a centre of radiance and

warmth under the great carved mantel. "I have felt that there was a human atmosphere here which the rest of the house seemed to lack. I think I should have liked the man who created this room and felt at home in it," she added with a smile.

"I am sure he would have liked *you*," answered Hastings, in a tone of unmistakable sincerity.

His eyes dwelt, as he spoke, on the slender figure, with its grace and distinction, and on the lovely face; while he framed the futile wish that Mr. Darracote could have known what presence would follow his in the library he loved, and on which he had so stamped his individuality that his presence seemed still to linger in it, his face almost to rise out of the depths of the russet leather chair where he was accustomed to sit.

It was in this chair that Irma now sat down.

"I am very much pleased if you really think so," she said. "Here among his books, I have thought of him very often and tried to fancy what he was like. It seems sad that in his own home no one remembers him with anything of affection, or even" — she hesitated — "with kindness."

Hastings' face grew a little stern.

"There are those who should remember him not only with kindness but with gratitude," he said. "As a simple matter of justice, let me beg you not to take your idea of Mr. Darracote from what Mrs. Treherne may say of him. As you have learned, there are natures so unsympathetic that liking between them is impossible, and such natures were those two. Yet this did not prevent Mr. Darracote from giving Mrs. Treherne the shelter of his protec-

tion at a time when she greatly needed it, and from dealing with her very generously throughout."

Irma looked at the speaker with a quick glance of approval.

"I am glad you have said this, for it seems only justice that I, who take a child's place in his house, should think of him rightly," she answered. "But don't fancy that I have listened, or that I would listen, to anything which really did him wrong. No one has said anything of that kind. But there is a manner of speaking of a person which conveys an impression — an idea — "

"I know exactly the kind of idea which has been conveyed to you, — that of a man hard, cold, disagreeable, with no attractive qualities whatever."

"Yes, I must confess it is very much that idea which has been given me."

"Let me assure you, then, that it is an idea which does Mr. Darracote great injustice. He was not a man whom it was easy to know; but under apparent hardness and coldness he possessed a great deal of deep feeling. People whom he did not like found him caustic and sarcastic. But to those whom he did like he was a most interesting companion, shrewd, humorous, and with a very sincere love of literature, as his books indicate."

"What a sympathetic picture you draw of him!" said Irma. "I am very glad that we chanced to touch on the subject. Now I shall know how to think of him in future, when I am here alone with his books."

"You are a very harmonious presence among them," said Hastings. "I can fancy him pleasantly at home in the atmosphere you have created."

"Then you feel a change?" she said, a little wistfully. "I am sorry. I did not wish to disturb anything."

"You have disturbed nothing: you have only added a few adorning touches," he answered.

His glance turned toward the touches of which he spoke,—some bowls of flowers on the massive library table; a piece of needlework with an Italian book open beside it; a low, graceful tea-table in a corner near the fire. There was, as he said, nothing disturbing in any of these things. They harmonized with the studious quiet of the stately room, like the presence of the girl who had chosen this library as the setting of her life in preference to any of the bright, luxurious apartments which most women would have preferred.

"Sometimes adornments are impertinences," she said. "I have not meant to add anything of the kind. But flowers are a necessity of life to me—or, at least, they are its greatest luxury. When nothing seemed more unlikely than that I should ever become rich, I used to say that if ever I were, I would have flowers in abundance all the time. The satisfaction of that desire is the only pleasure wealth has brought me so far."

The words were evidently spoken without the least thought of effect, but to Hastings they seemed at once surprising and pathetic. He smiled, half touched, half amused.

"It is pleasant to think that it will bring you many more," he said.

"Will it?" she asked quietly. "What?"

The very simplicity of the question seemed for a

moment to deprive him of the power to answer it. How could a man begin to answer anything so widely comprehensive and at the same time expressive of an unworldliness so great as to be incredible?

"If it is possible," he said, "that you are in earnest in asking what wealth can bring you, I can only reply by saying — everything! You have surely lived in a veritable Arcadia if you do not know that he who possesses it has the world at his feet."

"I have already told you in what kind of Arcadia I have lived," she said. "It was one in which money could buy very little, except, of course, a certain degree of comfort and independence of life. Beyond that, I ask again, in all sincerity, what can it give?"

"Pleasure, admiration, luxury; the power to gratify every desire, even every whim; to transport yourself at will from one end of the world to the other; to live where and with whom you like, — in short, to command all the varied joys and advantages in which the world abounds," replied the man of the world, unhesitatingly.

The girl did not answer for a moment, but sat with her dark eyes fastened on the glowing depths of the fire, as if meditating upon his words. Then she said, with the same quietness:

"My father always told me that there was not only no lasting gratification in these things, but that those who pursued them lost in the end the power of enjoying anything. And my own observation, since I have been in a world where people live only to amuse themselves, has assured me that he was right."

"I fear," said Hastings, "that you have been very unfortunate in your associations in this world."

She turned her eyes on him.

"Will you pardon me, if I am personal for a moment?" she said. "Will you allow me to ask what is your experience?"

"Oh, you must not appeal to me!" he replied with a slight laugh. "I have been in the world a long time, and — well, I have no doubt my friends would tell you that I am very cynical and *blasé*."

"Are there many things which amuse you?"

"I am afraid that I must confess that there are very few."

"And yet no doubt you have had the power to gratify all your wishes and tastes?"

"Again I must confess that I have had the power to a degree rather uncommon. I have lived chiefly abroad, — for in this strenuous country there is no place for an idle man, — and I have consistently spent my life in doing those things which commended themselves as agreeable and likely to give me pleasure. I am one of a class which the workers of the world, especially my esteemed friends who are wearing out their bodies, brains, and nerves in piling up millions they can never spend, call contemptuously epicureans."

"And the end of it all is — ?"

"Why do you wish to force me to further confessions, and make me point a moral for your theories? I would much prefer to show you how many pleasures await you, and to convince you how charming life can be to one who is young, rich, and beautiful."

"I have never doubted that life is full of possibili-

ties of interest and pleasure," she answered. "But I hardly think that any of them — or very few — will be bought by the wealth which has come to me so unexpectedly. Indeed, if I thought that I should ever become dependent on it for happiness, I would give it away at once, before it could accomplish its work."

"You must not do that," said Hastings, impressed, greatly to his own surprise, with an absolute conviction of her sincerity; "for wealth is a great power, and should not be lightly cast aside. Wait, and in time, believe me, you will find more than sufficient use for it. Meanwhile let me say that I am glad my old friend made no mistake in that last will and testament of his; and that his home and his fortune have found a mistress who would be, I am sure, altogether after his own heart."

"I am afraid," she said, looking up at him as he rose and stood before her, "that I should not be altogether after his own heart; but I do believe — I have had an instinct ever since I first entered this room — that we would have liked each other, and been sympathetic in spite of differences."

"And is it asking too much to hope that you will extend as much as that to one whose only claim to ask it is the friendship of the past between his name and yours?" Hastings inquired, offering his hand with the grace of manner which many people — women especially — had found irresistible. "I don't forget that you have decided that no one in this frivolous, mercenary world is worthy to be your friend —"

"Mr. Hastings, is it kind to make me feel that I have been very rude?"

"Not for an instant did I intend or wish to make you feel so!" Hastings protested. "I acknowledge the truth of your indictments both in general and in particular, but I too have instincts, and one of these instincts tells me that we may 'like each other and be sympathetic in spite of differences.'"

With an air of charming cordiality, Irma placed her hand in his.

"I am sure of it," she said frankly, "else we could not have talked as we have at our first meeting."

"And if I come soon — very soon again — you will not think that I am presuming on your kindness?"

"On the contrary. But you must not go until I have given you a cup of tea. I fancied Mrs. Treherne would have returned by this time."

Hastings, not in the least anxious to meet Mrs. Treherne, was about to decline the cup of tea which might entail such a meeting, when the familiar voice, with its light, artificial ring, spoke suddenly behind him.

"'Talk of angels' — ! Here I am, my dear, tired and longing for a cup of tea. How good of you to have waited for me! Ah, Mr. Hastings, how do you do? So glad you have found your way to Argyle again."

III

"AND now," said Mrs. Treherne, "tell me what you think of her?"

It was an hour later. The sun, which had been shining so brightly when Hastings found Irma in the garden, had now accomplished his short journey and was setting in a sky of pale gold. But the winter day was still full of charm, and its crisp atmosphere sufficiently suggestive of pleasure in outdoor exercise to account for Mrs. Treherne's frankly expressed intention of walking across the grounds with him, when he rose again to take his leave after a pleasant interval of tea and talk beside the library fire.

"As I drove home I thought how delightful a short turn in the garden would be," she declared, "and said to myself that as soon as I had a cup of tea I would ask Irma to go out with me. But if she has been such a naughty, imprudent girl as to have been *sitting* outdoors, she must remain in now and try to avoid the cold which is likely to prove the consequence. Fate, you see, has sent you to take her place," she added, with a laughing glance at Hastings; "and since I dislike my own company exceedingly, I will therefore walk with you across the grounds."

"I am equally flattered and honored," he replied. "While I do not dislike my own company, — having, indeed, rather a partiality for it, — I am only too delighted when better company is offered me."

"One knows how much of your compliments to take *au pied de la lettre*," she returned, lifting a large

fur-lined wrap, which she had thrown aside on entering, and extending it to him.

After he had placed it over her shoulders, and they were together in the delicately tinted frosty world outside, he could not but observe her with the admiration which her appearance at least never failed to draw from him. The soft richness of the furs about her throat set off, as only furs can, the head which rose above them, the fair face, the masses of bright hair, crowned with a velvet toque which looked simplicity itself, but was costly and elegant with the costliness and elegance of Paris, — the whole indescribable air of refined, luxurious worldliness; of beauty formed in the mould and stamped with the seal of highest fashion. Of this type had always been the women whom Hastings admired and around whom he had fluttered. If he had admired Eleanor Treherne more and fluttered around her longer than around others, it was only because she was a supreme embodiment of the things to which the intensely worldly side of his nature responded.

But that his nature possessed another side was proved by the fact that no such woman, neither Eleanor Treherne nor another, had ever been able to exercise a lasting fascination over him. And now what strange influence was it which suddenly to his mental vision placed beside the brilliant, seductive woman of the world the image of the slender, black-clad girl who had shortly before walked by his side along these paths, and which made him feel that the contrast was as if a pearl snatched from the far depths of ocean were placed beside one of those brilliant products of the art of man

which are only not diamonds because they are not real?

It was while this thought was in his mind that Mrs. Treherne, looking up at him with her eyes of curiously blended color, abruptly asked the question:

"And now tell me what you think of her?"

"Of Miss Darracote?" he answered. "She strikes me as very attractive. She has a picturesque type of beauty, and much natural distinction of appearance and manner."

"Could n't you possibly catalogue her virtues and qualities of mind?" asked Mrs. Treherne. "No doubt you discovered some of those things as well as the 'picturesque beauty' and the 'natural distinction' during your *tête-à-tête* this afternoon."

"Yes," he responded: "I discovered several sufficiently rare virtues and unusual qualities of mind. But allow me, with more reason, to return the question and to ask what do you think of her?"

"My opinion is of no importance."

"On the contrary, your opinion is of great importance; for you are the only person who knows anything about her. I have seen a striking-looking girl, and heard her express some thoughts and sentiments rather out of the ordinary line of young ladies' conversation; but beyond that what do I know of her? Whereas you, who have now been with her for months, must know a great deal."

"Which of course it will interest you to hear."

"Which it will certainly and very naturally interest me to hear. Mr. Darracote's heiress cannot be an object of indifference to me."

"I never for an instant imagined that she would be

an object of indifference to you," said Mrs. Treherne, in a tone which she would have liked to render a shade less bitter had she been able to do so. "But since her chief — one may say her only claim upon interest rests in the fact that she *is* Mr. Darracote's heiress, there does not seem much necessity for adding anything else."

"Probably not," replied Hastings, with admirable carelessness, "especially as I shall soon be able to form an opinion for myself, since she is good enough to allow me to resume my old privileges of friendship at Argyle."

Mrs. Treherne laughed, but the silvery sound had anything save a tone of mirth.

"Already!" she exclaimed. "You are to be congratulated on your immediate success. But of course there was nothing else to be expected — either on her side or on yours."

Hastings stopped short and turned toward her.

"Will you kindly interpret that remark?" he said, in his cool, quiet voice. "I should like to know why there was nothing else to be expected, either on Miss Darracote's side or on mine."

Their eyes met, and for a minute there was silence; but in that silence glance spoke to glance in a manner which rendered speech unnecessary — or, rather, with a frankness not to be expressed in speech without a disregard of those conventionalities which people trained like these never forget save in moments of supreme excitement. In Hastings' eyes were to be read disdain and contemptuous indifference. "What a fool you are to imagine that by anything you may do or say you can prevent my

taking the course which it pleases me to take! Why do you not recognize your powerlessness? Why are you so foolish as to endeavor to provoke and annoy me? You have everything to lose and nothing to gain by such methods." This is what Mrs. Treherne read, as plainly as if it had been spoken, during that moment in which they silently faced each other; and the perception inspired her with an almost uncontrollable desire to overwhelm him with words which would have ended all pretence of friendliness between them.

But the very coolness of that question — "Why do you not recognize your own powerlessness?" — enabled her to control herself. For the present, it was true, she *was* powerless; and all that she could gain by any outburst, any revelation either of her own exceeding folly or of anything else, would be to deepen the disdain in those eyes, every expression of which she knew so well. Perhaps some day fate would put a weapon in her hand, and then — she drew in her breath sharply. Yes, it was worth waiting for. And he was right; she was a fool not to be able to bide her time with a better grace. Something of this, but certainly not all, Hastings read in her eyes, before the lids suddenly fell over them, as if to end possible revelations. At the same instant she walked on.

"Have you grown very dull or very serious that, with an air of putting a pistol to my head, you demand an explanation of my little jests?" she asked. "I don't propose to feed your vanity by saying why there was nothing else to be expected but an immediate league of friendship on Miss Darra-

cote's side. But on yours — well, one knows that you are captivated by whatever is new, fresh, attractive; and certainly our heiress is all of those things. When you asked me a few minutes ago what I thought of her, it was only to tease you that I refused to answer. As a matter of fact, I find her charming, although peculiar. That, however, was to be expected."

"If I may be permitted to inquire without again being suspected of having an air of putting a pistol to your head, why was it to be expected?"

"From her manner of life, of course! She never had any education — in a regular manner, that is; and she has not only never had any social training, but she is as ignorant of society as — a savage I was about to say, only there is really nothing of the savage about her."

"Nothing very perceptible, certainly," Hastings agreed.

"But she is inconceivably ignorant of the simplest things," Mrs. Treherne went on. "And as for her ideas with regard to matters in general, I am tempted to say that they are those of a fool; and yet she is n't exactly a fool, either."

"You seem to find it very difficult to express your opinion of Miss Darracote without qualifications," Hastings said. "From which I conclude that she has a complex character — "

"No, no! simplicity itself," the other interrupted quickly. "But in these days we trace everything to antecedents and environment, don't we? Well, in her antecedents she is the child of an idealist and an Italian woman who in character and training was

of course as remote from *our* world as it is possible to imagine anything. Then her environment has been altogether Bohemian, artistic, unconventional in the extreme. The result is a person who strikes one as a new type — original, natural, attractive, but absolutely impracticable, and ready at any moment to do some wild and foolish thing as a result of the teachings of her father, who must have been a cross between a saint and a Socialist."

"I perceive," observed Hastings, "that I was not wrong in thinking that you could throw much light upon Miss Darracote's character if you wished to do so. Your study of it from the antecedent and environment point of view is full of instruction. And so you think her father was a cross between a saint and a Socialist!"

"The worst of whom I have ever heard," said Mrs. Treherne, as if her knowledge of such crosses was extensive. "Absolutely impracticable. One almost wishes that he had lived. It would have been delicious to see Uncle Darracote's carefully hoarded millions in the kind of hands he so heartily detested. I should have regarded it as a providential retribution upon him."

"A retribution for not having left his millions to —you and me, let us say? But after all, we had neither of us any claim upon him; and I don't know that the uses we should be likely to make of the money would be much more in accordance with his desires than the uses his cousin would presumably have made of it."

"*You* certainly have no reason to complain of his conduct," said Mrs. Treherne. "He not only gave

you a handsome share of his fortune, but arranged matters so that the rest will fall very easily into your hands."

"Will it?" said Hastings, meditatively. He did not think it worth while to point out that he had not complained of Mr. Darracote's conduct toward himself, nor to disclaim any intention of possessing himself of those millions which had been offered him in a manner of which Mrs. Treherne knew nothing. He was, in fact, wondering if it were as she said — if the young heiress were indeed of such impressionable material that he had but to put out his hand and take them.

The woman beside him glanced at him with a smile, which was anything but pleasant, on her lips. She divined his thoughts with the keen instinct of what had once been love now converted into resentment and dislike. Of course he would seize the golden opportunity thus placed before him. She had been sure of it from the first moment she saw Irma and recognized the girl's rare charm. That no degree of gilding would have won favor for her in Gerard Hastings' eyes had she been unattractive or even ordinary, Mrs. Treherne knew well; but given the union of poetic beauty with great wealth, the result could readily be foreseen.

"Surely," she said suddenly, "you need not hesitate to speak frankly to an old friend like myself. The situation is perfect: it arranges itself; 'it jumps at the eyes,' as the French say. Here is this girl, with all her money and a disengaged fancy — I discovered that for you; and here are you, wanting a fresh sensation, a new emotion, and not averse to

a little or, better yet, a great deal of money. Nothing could be more perfect."

"From my point of view, perhaps not," he replied. "But you must agree that a worn-out worldling such as you describe — and as I must confess that I am — is hardly likely to suit the fancy of a young heiress with the world at her feet and her head full of ideals."

"But she is so ridiculously, incredibly ignorant that she does not know that the world is at her feet," Mrs. Treherne returned. "If you are wise, you will establish your influence before she discovers it. And as for the ideals, she will probably weave them around *you*. That is a woman's way — until she learns better."

Something in her tone — a singular note of earnestness under its mocking lightness — suddenly struck Hastings, who up to this time had been parrying her thrusts with a sense of contemptuous amusement. He knew well that if anything could render her own loss of the Darracote fortune more bitter, it would be that it should pass into his possession, especially in the manner under discussion; yet there could be no doubt that in some degree at least she was serious in her suggestion that he should establish his influence with the heiress before the latter learned how much the world stood ready to offer her. It was not the voice alone which assured him of this. Turning again, he looked keenly into her eyes, and read there a sincerity which puzzled and baffled him.

"So you don't believe that I am honest?" she said, interpreting his glance. "What a dreadful

thing it is to have such a bad conscience that one distrusts even one's best friends! Whether you believe it or not, I arranged everything in my mind as soon as I met Irma in Paris. I satisfied myself that you had an open field, and I have kept every one else away until you should have your chance, if you cared to take it. That was always the doubt — whether you would care to take it; for you are so capricious, so difficult, so indifferent to chances for which other men would give their eyes, that one never knows. But this afternoon " — she paused, and something which not even Gerard Hastings' exhaustive knowledge of women enabled him to comprehend flashed into her eyes, shone there for an instant, then disappeared, — " I think I perceived this afternoon that the little drama which I have pleased myself by anticipating will be played as I have fancied. Tell me, is it not so? Be frank; give me your confidence for the sake of old times.

As she looked up at him smiling, while she uttered these words, the thought flashed through his mind that there were not many men at whom she would have smiled in vain. For her beauty had never been more potent to charm than now in its rich maturity; and as she stood in the midst of the winter landscape, with the pale yellow of sunset behind, and in front the white moon floating in a sky of faintest blue, the cold colors and low tones of the scene threw into effective relief the beautiful, luxurious figure, so suggestive of the fascinations of the world, of all its many appeals to the senses of men.

" Why should you imagine that I don't believe you, and that I am not very grateful for your interest

in my fortunes?" he asked. "But when you talk of dramas to be played and ask for my confidence, I can only reply that the confidence should be yours if I had any to give. But at present I have none. Surely you forget how old I am when you credit me with sufficient impulsiveness to have decided in a single interview to become the suitor of a young lady who, by your own statement, is peculiar as well as charming. No man can answer for the future; but for the present I assure you that I have formed no plan at all regarding Miss Darracote and her fortune."

Mrs. Treherne dropped her eyes.

"So you will not be frank," she said. "You will not trust me. Well, all the same, I know, even if you do not, what will be the end. Fate is too strong for any man. You will take the chance which is offered you. Bah!" — her tone was full of scorn now — "did I not read it in your eyes and hear it in your voice this afternoon? You cannot deceive a woman who has — known you as long as I have, Gerard Hastings."

"Why should I have the faintest desire to deceive you?" he asked. "You have, as you say, known me a long time, so you should know whether or not I am in the habit of uttering untruths."

"In words — no," she answered. "There your conventional standard of honor comes in. A gentleman does not lie. But a gentleman may deceive by concealment, by evasion —"

He interrupted her by laughing.

"You are most flattering. But why should I conceal or evade in this case?"

Again the underlying contempt made itself clearly

evident to her ear. Why indeed? Why should he conceal (or avow) anything to one whom he had swept so utterly out of his life as herself? This was what the tone, rather than the words, said to her consciousness, whether correctly or not. She looked up quickly, and there was something in her glance which struck him (although he could have laughed again at the absurdity of the idea) as at once a challenge and a menace.

"Well," she said lightly, "we will dismiss the subject. But perhaps you may have occasion to remember what I have told you: that the field is clear at present, though no one can say how long it will remain so; and on my part I shall watch the developments which I foresee with the greatest interest. I have never before played the part of a spectator in such a drama, but the novelty of the position will give it additional zest. Now good-bye — no, you must not think of returning a step with me! No doubt we shall meet soon again, since you have resumed your old privileges of friendship at Argyle."

She smiled, nodded, turned, and moved away down the garden walk; while Hastings, looking after her, asked himself what she could possibly mean by these strange overtures, and why that last glance of her eyes had seemed a revelation of something almost sinister.

IV

MEANWHILE the girl, who had been left alone in Mr. Darracote's great chair by the library fire, remained quite still after the others had gone out and the shadows of twilight began to gather in the spacious room. As these shadows deepened, the radiance of the fire asserted itself, and bathed in lovely light the young figure sitting so motionless, the young face gazing meditatively into the glowing depths.

"He is not disagreeable," was what she was thinking. "He is not supercilious and affected, nor — apparently — insincere. No doubt he is as worldly and perhaps as mercenary as Mrs. Treherne says; but there is something attractive about him, — something which makes one feel that it is possible to speak to him as it has not been possible to speak to any one else. Is it not so, Rex?" she said aloud to the collie, who suddenly lifted himself from the hearth-rug and laid his head in her lap. "You like him; and I think your instinct is better worth trusting than that of many people. It was good to hear how he spoke of your dead master, — good to have one honest, loyal word uttered about him beneath this roof. *You* could not speak, dear doggie, and *I* had no knowledge; but I always felt that he must have been different from the odious character Mrs. Treherne described. And since she was so mistaken about one, why should she not be mistaken about the other? There are people who can see only the worst

side of a character, — its infirmities, its littlenesses, the faults we all possess. I think she is one of those, so I shall put aside the recollection of what she has said of Mr. Hastings and judge him for myself. It is certain that he is the first person whom I have met in my new life of whom I feel that it might be possible to make a friend. And in my old life I had so many, so very many friends, Rex," — and the lips trembled a little over the words, — "that it seems strange to be without any now, except you and dear old Margherita. And this reminds me — come! we must go and cheer her up a little."

The dog understood the tone, if not the words; and, springing to his feet, ran before her to the door, then across the hall and up the stairs to another door, where he stood wagging his tail in an attitude of expectancy until she reached and opened it.

A large chamber, furnished in virginal colors — softest blue and white — was revealed. But Rex knew this was not their final destination; and bounding across the floor, he pushed open an inner door which gave access to a smaller room, intended for a dressing-room, but converted into another chamber, where before a grate of glowing coal sat a short, dark woman with a melancholy expression, engaged in darning stockings despite the growing dusk.

She started and uttered an exclamation as the dog reached her side and pushed his cold nose into her hand; then she looked up and saw the figure advancing toward her.

"Sit still, Margherita," said Irma's soft tones, in

Italian, "and put down that darning instantly. You wicked woman! do you want to make yourself blind, so that I shall have nobody at all to look after me?"

"One must do something, signorina," replied Margherita sadly, as she laid aside the darning obediently and looked with her wistful eyes — affectionate and faithful as those of the dog beside her — at the girl who sat down in a chair on the opposite side of the hearth. "It is the best blessing of God, one's work. I have found that out now, though perhaps I grumbled somewhat when I had what I thought was too much of it. But too much is better than too little, — oh, very much better! Now I have so little that I am thankful when I can find any holes in your stockings to darn."

"I will try to provide them for you a little faster," said Irma, with a smile, which was partly for the thought that she could order a new supply of stockings every day, if it pleased her to do so, without incurring the charge of extravagance. "My poor Margherita! I know you are not happy in this new life, and I fear I was selfish and wrong to bring you into it."

"As if I would have been left behind!" replied Margherita, with a flash in her eyes, "even if I had not promised the signor that I would never leave you."

"What!" exclaimed Irma, quickly. "Did my father ever talk to you of what he feared?"

"Yes, signorina. Have I never told you? It was the day when we parted at the church door in Passy and you insisted that I should go home. I was angry, because I saw no need for it — God for-

give me! — and when I entered the garden where the signor was sitting, and he inquired for you, I told him that you were tired of old Margherita and that you had insisted on my coming home, saying that he might need something; while you went your way into the streets of Paris, where no one so young and so beautiful as you should have been seen alone. Then — *O carissima mia,* it breaks my heart to think of it! — he called me to him so gently, and laid his hand on mine and said many things, kinder far than I deserved, of my service and my faithfulness; and then he said: 'You are not a servant but a friend, Margherita, and therefore I want to tell you that I am so ill, little as you may think it, that I am likely to die at any moment. The signorina does not know this, but she suspects it, and this is why she has sent you home. You must not say one word to her; we will spare her as long as we can. But I tell you that you may understand, and also that you may promise me never to leave her; for after I am gone she will be very lonely, my poor child!'"

"O my father — my dear, dear father!" said Irma, with a sudden burst of tears. "How lonely, how sad of heart, not even you could tell!"

"And then, signorina," Margherita went on, weeping also, "I knelt down by him and promised — and I called God and the Blessed Mother to witness the promise — that I would never leave you while you had any need of me, and that I would follow you wherever you went. I didn't think then that you would be likely to go so far, but it is all the same: I will never leave you unless you drive

me away. But I should be glad if there were only something more that I could find to do for you."

"You may be sure that I will never drive you away," said Irma, putting down Rex, who was insistently offering sympathy in a grief which his heart, itself acquainted with grief, clearly divined. "And I must try to find something more for you to do. But it is a little puzzling. You see we are so oppressively rich now, and there are so many servants to do everything — "

"A great many more than there need be!" Margherita cried sharply. "Half of them might do the work, the lazy — "

"Ah, never mind about that!" interposed Irma, who had heard it all before. "It would not do to cut down the household, because there is no need of economy, and we have a position to maintain. You must not forget that, absurd as it seems."

She had struck the right chord; for at these words Margherita lifted her head proudly.

"And why should it seem absurd?" she demanded. "It would not be absurd even if we were in Italy and you were the princess that you should be; for your mother — God rest her soul! — was a cousin (though far removed, it is true) to Prince Stronzolli."

"Well, you see, I must maintain my rank as cousin to a prince, now that I have the means to do so, even though we are not in Italy," said Irma; "and yet I should very much like to make you happy by providing you with an occupation if I could. Can you think of nothing you would like to do?"

"What I should like," said Margherita, "would be to work for you, and take care of you, and scold you sometimes, as I used to do; but I know that can never be again," she ended sadly, shaking her head. "You are a great lady now, and I would not have you anything else. But if you *could* send away that impudent Suzanne, and let me have charge of all your things, I should be better satisfied."

Irma could not but smile at this request; for she knew well that a deadly feud existed between Margherita and the French maid whom it had been Mrs. Treherne's first act to engage for her in Paris; and she was also aware that the fault was all on Margherita's side.

"But if I sent away Suzanne," she said, "I should have no peace with Mrs. Treherne until I had engaged some one to fill her place; and it is possible that you might not like the newcomer any better than Suzanne, who seems to me a very good girl, on the whole."

"Mrs. Treherne!" repeated Margherita, scornfully; and she burst forth into a voluble stream of words. "Why should not Mrs. Treherne herself go?" she asked. "Why should she stay to play mistress in a house where she is not mistress? It is Mrs. Treherne's orders here and Mrs. Treherne's orders there, and Mrs. Treherne to be consulted about everything — even the signorina's maid. And it was only yesterday I heard her say something to Mrs. Dickson about 'that old Italian woman.' She thought I understood no English: she is mistaken. I shall always say that it is a language fit for pigs, but I know much of it."

"Patience, patience, Margherita!" said Irma, sighing a little. "We cannot have things exactly as we would like in this world, no matter how rich we may be. Mrs. Treherne must be borne with, because I am too young to live alone, you know, and there is no one else to take charge of me. That she acts as mistress of the house where she has been mistress a long time, does not trouble me at all, so why should it trouble you? I am glad that she relieves me of the responsibility; for what do I know of ordering the affairs of a household like this? It is not like our little *ménage* in Paris, — the dear little *ménage* for which you and I used to go marketing in our happy days. But now let us talk no more of these things. Instead, I will tell you a piece of good news. Some one is coming — some one who belongs to our old life. Guess who it is."

"Signor Norbert perhaps?" said Margherita, promptly, — for she had not been blind in those old days of which Irma spoke.

The girl started and flushed suddenly. Was it because the thought of Norbert and his young, impetuous passion had grown dim with her amid all the changes which her life had lately known, and that her heart, loyal and constant to every claim upon it, reproached her for such forgetfulness?

"No," she said, "it is not Mr. Norbert. Why should you think of him? It is the Signorina Camilla. Since she made her *début* in Milan, she has been singing in Paris; and she has achieved such a triumph that the *impresarios* are offering her engagements everywhere. She is to go to London

next May; but she is coming to America first, and she will pay me a visit. Is not that delightful — to think of having Camilla here?"

Margherita agreed that it was indeed delightful; for next to Irma — although at a long interval — Camilla ranked in her affections, and her interest was intense in the triumph of which Irma spoke. She insisted upon all details; and they were still talking in the fire-lit dusk, with Rex sitting solemnly and happily between them, when a trim figure appeared in the door of Irma's chamber and a voice said in French:

"Is Mademoiselle ready to make her toilette? There is only half an hour until dinner."

It was Suzanne, the detested. Irma found herself giving an apologetic glance toward Margherita as she rose, saying:

"Yes, Suzanne, I am ready. I did not know it was so late."

It was while this conversation by the fireside was in progress that Mrs. Treherne, having parted from Hastings in the grounds, was walking homeward, wrapped in her soft furs, and smiling a little as if at some thought that pleased her. It was not an agreeable smile; but then Mrs. Treherne's expressions when alone were not always agreeable. Hard lines were apt to come out at such times about her lips, and cruel and crafty gleams to shine in her eyes. It is the penalty of these expressions that in time they write themselves indelibly on the countenance, but that time had not yet come with this fair-faced woman. Only the closest observer could

now perceive the harshness lurking beneath the softness, the narrowness and pettiness of soul which insincerity veiled.

It was with the aspect of one dwelling upon some pleasurable thought, which derived its keenest edge of pleasure from the fact that the matter on which it dwelt would *not* be agreeable to another person, that she strolled on through the clear winter twilight toward the stately house set in the midst of its wide-spreading lawns. And as she approached it, her glance suddenly perceived a figure coming along the drive which led from the gates, — a small, shrunken, insignificant figure, yet with something strangely familiar in its aspect.

She paused for an instant and caught her breath sharply. "That old man!" she exclaimed aloud. Then she hurried on quickly and reached the stone steps at the entrance of the house a little in advance of him.

So it occurred that when Peter Wilkins lifted his eyes from the gravelled drive on which they had been abstractedly bent, he saw before him the woman whom he had met in the hall of Argyle on the night when Mr. Darracote lay dying. Standing in the sunset light, her rich beauty, her whole air of arrogant superiority to the common things of life, struck him now, as it had struck him then, as altogether intimidating and overwhelming. It is an effect which such fine ladies as Mrs. Treherne like to inspire, and which never fails to afford them a distinct sensation of gratified vanity. At present it also gave Mrs. Treherne something more, — a sense of commanding the situation through the

awe which her appearance inspired. She smiled graciously.

"I think," she said, as Wilkins took off his hat, "that I have seen you before. It is Mr. — ah! — Watkins?"

"My name is Wilkins — Peter Wilkins, madam," the old man answered. "You saw me in this house the night Mr. Darracote died."

"I remember," said Mrs. Treherne, who indeed remembered perfectly. "You came down from his room only a few minutes before he died. It was very sad, for there is no doubt that the excitement of your visit hastened the end."

Wilkins looked as conscience-stricken as she could have desired.

"I was afraid of it," he said, "but what could I do? I was forced to see him — I could never have forgiven myself if I had n't seen him! And yet he died without doing anything!"

"He had no time," Mrs. Treherne reminded him reproachfully. "After you went away, I hardly reached him before he died. Perhaps if he had lived — "

"If he had lived he would have done justice," the old clerk said solemnly. "He told me that he would, and I never knew him break his word. It seems a pity that he could n't have lived an hour — just an hour — longer, but God's will be done! And since it was n't allowed," he added, lifting his brown, pathetic eyes to Mrs. Treherne's face, "I have come to see what I can do with the young lady who has inherited everything."

Mrs. Treherne's heart began to beat quickly.

"I don't think it likely that Miss Darracote will see you," she said. "Already she has so many applications for charity that she—"

"Charity!" Wilkins interrupted, and there was a flash of indignation in the brown eyes now. "I have not come to ask for charity, madam. I am seeking justice."

"I fear," said Mrs. Treherne, with a faint, contemptuous smile, "that you will find justice even harder than charity to obtain. And, besides, is it exactly Miss Darracote's place to do justice in the manner you desire? If you have any claim to make against Mr. Darracote's estate, why do you not see Mr. Kirby?"

She looked at him keenly as she made this suggestion, and Peter Wilkins had no idea how much he gratified her by the frankness with which he answered:

"I have seen Mr. Kirby. I went to him after Mr. Darracote's death. But"—he shook his head sadly—"it was no use. He has n't any power to help me. He told me that Mr. Darracote's executors can do nothing outside of the will. If there is any claim to be made against the estate, I must take it into the courts. But I can't do that, you know,—not if it can possibly be avoided."

"I suppose not," said Mrs. Treherne. "It would be very expensive."

"It is n't only that it would be expensive," the old clerk returned simply. "Even if I had the means I could n't bear to drag the name of one whom I honored as much as I honored Mr. Darracote into the publicity of courts and newspapers. It is something

he would never have forgiven. And I feel bound to respect his wishes as much now that he is dead as when he was living. So I have come to lay the case before the young heiress. She is young and should have a heart easily touched."

The contempt of Mrs. Treherne's smile visibly deepened.

"I don't think that even young hearts are easily touched to the point of giving away or sharing fortunes," she said. "I advise you to be satisfied with what Mr. Kirby told you and to make no attempt to see Miss Darracote. You cannot possibly gain anything by seeing her."

"Excuse me," said Wilkins, with a new firmness in his voice, "I have come to see Miss Darracote, and I shall not go away until I have given her the opportunity of saying whether or not she will see me."

He mounted the steps as he spoke, with the evident intention of ringing the door-bell; and his determination was so unexpected, especially when taken in connection with his appearance, that Mrs. Treherne felt command of the situation rapidly escaping her. She possessed, however, a quickness of resource which had saved the command for her in many another situation as it saved it now.

"In that case," she said, interposing and opening the hall door before his hand could touch the bell, "I shall have pleasure in taking you in myself, and in letting Miss Darracote know who it is that wishes to see her."

She led him across the spacious, fire-lit, rug-strewn hall into her own special apartment, — a

room which reflected her character and tastes as the rooms we inhabit mostly do. Here were all the luxuries of modern furnishing: couches, cushions, easy-chairs of every variety, bric-a-brac in quantities; softly shaded lamps, by the light of which it was impossible to do anything save talk; and a subtle pervading perfume, which added to the general effect of almost enervating luxury. Into this (to him) bewildering place Peter Wilkins was conducted, and here his guide turned to him with her most gracious smile.

"Sit down, Mr. Wilkins," she said, "while I go and inquire if Miss Darracote will see you. She is — how shall I say? — rather peculiar, and she has so far declined to see any of the old friends of her cousin. But she may make an exception in your favor. I will try to induce her to do so, I assure you."

"Thank you, madam, very much!" said the old clerk, gratefully. Of the sincerity of this kindness he had not an instant's doubt, and it only occurred to him to wonder a little why Mrs. Treherne should take so much trouble in his behalf. Evidently, he reflected as he sat alone, staring at a wonderful, opalescent, globe-like lamp, it was not well to judge even fine ladies too hastily by their appearance. Who could have imagined, for instance, that this particular fine lady would display so much interest in an insignificant old man like himself, and in obtaining for him the interview he desired with this peculiar heiress?

Meanwhile the disinterested person in question was walking across the hall toward the library, with

her brows contracted in deep thought. What a fool she had been to overlook Peter Wilkins! This was her reflection. She had fancied that a very pretty little game, which she had carefully arranged, was in her own hand, when, lo! fate sent this man across her path as if to warn her that, except in a limited degree, it was not in her hand, after all. For she had not lived with Irma for months without learning enough of the girl's character to know that, should she meet the old clerk, all of her (Mrs. Treherne's) well-laid plans would be brought to naught by the simplest means. Yet how was it possible to prevent their meeting? What could she say that would induce Irma to refuse to see one who, she was certain to feel, had a strong claim upon her consideration?

It was a perplexing question, which she had not answered when, trusting to inspiration, she opened the library door and entered, expecting to find Irma where she had left her a short time before. The vacant room first surprised, and then seemed to give an answer to her questionings. She stopped short in the middle of the floor, and stood, with half-parted lips, gazing at the chair where she had seen the girl last. Was this the solution? Should she simply send the troublesome visitor away with a facile falsehood? She had meant — honestly meant, so she assured herself — to report his presence, although she would have advised against seeing him. "A troublesome old man, who annoyed Uncle Darracote very much, and whom you cannot too soon discourage, my dear," was what she would have said. But now — the silence of the room, filled

only with soft firelight and the perfume of flowers, and the vacancy of that empty chair, gave another suggestion. Why say anything to her? Why not simply dismiss the man and suppress the incident? "Of course he cannot be counted upon to keep quiet for any length of time," she said to herself; "of course he remains, to a certain extent, a danger to be reckoned with. But I do not think that a very great length of time will be necessary to see all that I look for accomplished; and when *that* is the case — well, then, Mr. Wilkins, you may come with your story and your plea for justice as soon as you please. Meanwhile the game is in my hand, and I have never yet thrown up my cards. If there is only one chance, however slender, however desperate, for success, on principle I take that chance. And so I shall take this now."

She nodded toward the empty chair, set her lips firmly, and, turning, swept with a rustle of silken skirts from the room.

A little later, dejected and discouraged, Peter Wilkins was walking away from the door of Argyle; cheered only by the thought of Mrs. Treherne's sympathy, her evident reluctance to tell him that Miss Darracote positively declined to see him.

"So sorry, Mr. Wilkins!" the lady had murmured gently; "but it was quite impossible to move her. She may have heard something, — I don't know, of course. At least, she is determined not to see you. You know I warned you: I had an instinct she would refuse. Believe me, people don't wish to have unpleasant responsibilities thrust on them."

"That is quite true," the old man owned sadly.

"I had hoped — well, I will not annoy her again. I will go and try to decide what is best to do now. I am sorry to have troubled you, madam, and I beg you will accept my best thanks for your efforts in my behalf."

"You owe me no thanks at all," replied Mrs. Treherne, sweetly. "I wish I could have done more for you. But, you see, there was really nothing to be done."

V

"IT is altogether the loveliest thing I have ever seen!"

It was Mrs. Lawton's voice which spoke; and the words were echoed by a general chorus of acquiescence from the group of people gathered in the drawing-room of Argyle.

The object at which they were gazing was the statue which had been Gilbert Darracote's last work. Executed in marble, the charming creation seemed to have gained, if not in beauty, at least in the suggestion of ethereal spirituality. Standing in relief against a rich bronze-green velvet curtain, the nymph, with her slender form, her springing feet and fluttering draperies, was like a white dream of virginal grace, of radiant joyousness, of airy motion enchanted into the stillness of art.

"One might fancy it a Pysche direct from Hellas," said Rapier when the chorus of admiration somewhat subsided, — he never spoke unless sure of attention for his utterances, — "if one did not perceive so clearly that the sculptor has had a modern inspiration."

Lucia Wynne uttered an exclamation.

"Of course!" she cried. "It is Miss Darracote herself. Oh, how enchanting to be so immortalized! I should be wild with delight if I were in her place."

"Miss Darracote!" — "Why of course it is Miss Darracote!" — "What an admirable likeness!" — "How lovely! how interesting!" murmured the chorus, until one voice made itself heard above the rest.

"Was n't there something said about an artist lover? Perhaps this is *his* work, — does anybody know? Did Mrs. Treherne say? And how delightfully romantic if so!"

Mrs. Lawton turned toward the speaker.

"The sculptor was Miss Darracote's father," she said; "and he died just after finishing this. So we may suppose it has sad as well as proud associations for her. But there is no question of her having been his model. Any one can recognize the likeness, for she has hardly been idealized at all."

"It would be difficult to idealize her," suggested some one. "She is so remarkably picturesque — just the type artists admire, you know."

"That," said Rapier, "is the most surprising fact of all. How on earth does it come to pass that a good, honest, money-making grub, like our esteemed friend, the late Mr. Darracote, should be allied to, and succeeded by, anything so startling as a Psyche? We are not very much accustomed to encountering Psyches in ordinary life; and in all our speculations regarding the heiress, I think we hardly expected anything half so remarkable as we have found."

"I am sure we did not," responded Lucia Wynne, promptly. "For myself, I honestly admit that I am astonished. Indeed it would be a very dull person who did not perceive that 'the new heiress,' as we have been calling her, is something very extraordinary, quite apart from her heiress-ship."

"And whatever else we may be, we are not dull," complacently remarked yet another member of the group.

This was quite true. Taken as a whole, they esteemed themselves open to any other charge than that of dulness, these people who were assembled at Argyle on this the first day that it had been known that Mrs. Treherne was once more at home to her friends. They represented, in fact, a section of society which prided itself equally on its fashionable exclusiveness and its intellectual cultivation; and if they had responded with flattering eagerness to her intimation that she would resume her Thursdays, it was not, as may readily be supposed, because of any very high regard for Mrs. Treherne, but sprang, as that lady herself was thoroughly aware, from a keen interest in and curiosity concerning the heiress whom it was her good fortune to hold as a social trump card of the highest order.

"Yes, Miss Darracote will appear," she had said, in answer to solicitous inquiries. "She has promised that she will, in a quiet, informal way, meet a few of my friends. But it is not to be regarded as an introduction to society. Being in deep mourning, she will not go out at all this season. She is quite firm about that."

"So long as we are allowed to see her, we will

accept any terms," a gay young woman had laughed in reply to this.

And such was the opinion of all who wended their way out to Argyle on Mrs. Treherne's day of reception. So long as they might satisfy their curiosity by seeing the unknown heiress, with her picturesque antecedents and her wonderful fortune, it did not matter at all with what restrictions the privilege was hedged.

But it is safe to say that no one was prepared for the striking young creature whom they found. What they had expected nobody perhaps could have said; but all would have agreed, with Rapier, that it was not "anything half so remarkable" as this graceful girl, with her head which seemed to have been taken from an old Italian canvas, her beautiful eyes and radiant smile. It was probably because she had been brought up in Bohemia that Irma had but one manner, whether she were with artists and men of letters such as had gathered in her father's studio, with Margherita and Rex by the fireside of the former, or with fashionable society, as Mrs. Treherne presented it to her in her own drawing-room. But it was simply and solely because she was herself that this manner was so spontaneous and natural, so free from all effort and so devoid of self-consciousness; that learned and unlearned, gentle and simple, man, woman, and dog, alike found it fascinating.

And then, as if it were not enough to have introduced such an heiress to a society wholly unexpectant of anything of the kind, Mrs. Treherne had a further surprise in store for her friends. She brought it forward at the moment when, the impression pro-

duced by Irma having been fully made, there was a slight general pause, — a pause which did not mean lack of interest, but only, as it were, doubt as to what was to come next, and which was therefore the most effective moment possible for a surprise.

"I am very fortunate to-day," she said to the circle gathered about her tea-table; "for I have not only had the pleasure of presenting Miss Darracote to the world, and my friends to Miss Darracote, but I have also her permission to show you something very beautiful which has just arrived from Europe."

"Don't overpower us altogether, my dear Mrs. Treherne," suggested Rapier, who was seated at her elbow. And then, lowering his voice, he added: "You have already showed us something very beautiful which has just arrived from Europe, you know."

"But now I will show you something else — or, rather, I will show you the same thing in a different form," she laughed, glancing around at him. "Read that riddle if you can; or, better yet, come and see."

She rose as she spoke, and, with a general glance of invitation, swept across the floor toward an alcove-like recess at the farther end of the spacious room. Almost all the company followed her, and paused only when, an unexpected vision and dream of beauty, the Psyche stood revealed to them.

Irma, who had not moved from her seat, heard the subdued murmur of their admiration with a sudden, poignant sense of sadness. It pleased her that her father's genius should be recognized here where he was unknown; but the pleasure was accompanied by pain, — that pain of "remembering happier things,"

"It pleased her that her father's genius should be recognized . . . ."

which is truly "a sorrow's crown of sorrow," and which those who facilely forget are spared. She thought of the happy days when she had light-heartedly posed for him and watched the statue grow under his hand. The studio opened before her: she could see his smile, meet his eyes; hear his deep, musical voice talking, jesting, quoting Dante. It was as if she might put out her hand and touch the dear, familiar scene. And yet she knew that those things which happened in the birth of time were no further removed from her than that life of the past. Only the Psyche remained to connect her with it; and the Psyche, like herself, was now in a new, strange world, and under the cold, critical gaze of stranger eyes.

She was not aware what a shade of sorrow her thoughts cast over her face until some one suddenly sat down beside her and a kind voice said:

"I am afraid there is something sad for you, my dear, in this little surprise of Mrs. Treherne's."

Looking around, she saw a lady, small, middle-aged, simply though elegantly dressed; with silvery hair smoothly folded under a black bonnet, and a clever, somewhat caustic face, whom she knew to be called Mrs. Royal Smith, and of whom it had been whispered to her that she was an undisputed social leader and sovereign.

"Yes," Irma answered; "there is much that is sad for me in it, because the statue at which they are looking was my father's last work, and one in which I was very closely associated with him. I am glad for it to be seen, since nobody here knows anything of his great genius; but there is nothing which has

such power to recall to me the happy days of my life with him, which are gone forever."

The sincerity of her tone was not lost on the woman whose experience had not made her cynical, although she was generally credited with being so, thanks to a keenness for perceiving shams, an incisive wit, and a sharp tongue. All the more because she knew her world to the core was she touched by the regret in the voice of this girl whom that world held so rarely enviable, when she spoke of "the happy days" of Bohemianism, obscurity, and comparative poverty, which were gone forever with the father she adored.

"I am sure," she said gently, "that they must have been very happy days to you; for there is nothing more delightful than such association between father and daughter. And when a genius *is* companionable — many geniuses are not, you know — the companionship is simply fascinating. I knew your father well enough to know that it was so with him."

"You knew my father!" cried Irma. "Oh, what an unexpected pleasure! I did not think that I should find any one here who had ever known him."

"You must not fancy us absolute barbarians," Mrs. Royal Smith replied, smiling. "There are a few people here and there who do not need for genius to be advertised in order to recognize it. The friends and admirers of Gilbert Darracote belonged to that class. Long ago, when we were both young, I was his friend, and I have always remained his admirer."

Irma leaned forward and took the lady's hand in both her own.

"How good of you to come and tell me this!" she said, — "how very good!"

"You are a dear child to be grateful for so little," said Mrs. Royal Smith. "Like the rest of our friends" — and she glanced somewhat satirically toward the other end of the room, — "I came here to-day specially to see you and was very curious concerning you. But my curiosity was not for the heiress of the Darracote fortune, but for the daughter of Gilbert Darracote. I wondered if you would be like him — "

"I am not."

"In appearance, no. But in character I fancy that you may be. And, fancying this, I shall watch your career with peculiar interest. I cannot but wonder what Gilbert Darracote's daughter will do with Richard Darracote's fortune. Forgive me for speaking so frankly. But the situation appeals to me very much — especially since I have seen you."

Irma looked at her with a very wistful expression in her dark eyes.

"You don't know how often I think of the power which has so unexpectedly come into my hands, and ask myself what I am to do with it," she said. "What I desire to do is something noble, — something such as my father would have done."

"Your father," said the elder woman, "was the most absolutely unworldly person I have ever known. What *he* would have done it is impossible to say and difficult even to imagine. What *you* may do, my dear, must be in great degree determined by circumstances, as a woman's acts mostly are."

"Why should a woman's acts be determined by circumstances more than those of a man?"

"Generally speaking, because she is less free."

"But *I* am free," the girl returned, — "sorrowfully and entirely free. Not only is there nobody who has any right to suggest what I shall or shall not do, but there is no one who has any claim upon me."

"At present, perhaps not," said Mrs. Royal Smith — and then she paused. To a girl of the ordinary type she would have added the obvious conclusion of her sentence; but her perceptions were too keen for her not to recognize that Irma was of a very different type from the ordinary. Suitors, fortune-seekers, marriage with all its chances and its complications, — she hesitated to speak of them to this girl with the vestal eyes and lips. Yet who knew better than herself that these were the forces which, in all human probability, would mould her future and dictate its acts?

It was in this momentary pause that her glance fell on a figure which appeared in the open door of the drawing-room and crossed the floor toward Irma and herself.

"Ah!" she said, putting up her eyeglasses. "Here is some one who has always been a familiar presence at Argyle. Have you met Mr. Hastings?"

"Yes," Irma answered. "It has not been many days since I saw him first; but in the midst of so many new acquaintances, he already seems like an old one."

"No doubt," responded Mrs. Royal Smith. And then she shook her head at Hastings as he drew near. "I understand why you are so late," she said. "You have been stealing a march on all of us and making Miss Darracote's acquaintance *sub rosa*."

"I may be permitted to plead that the temptation

was great," he replied. "But I am sure Miss Darracote will bear witness that I was not guilty of any act of extreme violence in storming her acquaintance. I was simply introduced with partial kindness by one whose opinion had weight with her — "

"Mrs. Treherne, I suppose?" said the lady, lifting her eyebrows slightly.

"By no means. The friend who introduced me I have not the pleasure of seeing here at present. It was Rex — Mr. Darracote's favorite collie."

"You might have had a worse sponsor. I confess that a dog's liking would have weight with me."

"It has weight with all sensible people," Hastings said. "There are few better judges of character than dogs. If I had doubted whether Argyle had found a worthy mistress, I should have been fully convinced when I saw how Rex had transferred his allegiance to Miss Darracote."

"So Rex was good enough to vouch for Miss Darracote to you, as well as to introduce you to Miss Darracote! A very useful dog, I must say," remarked Mrs. Royal Smith, a little dryly. "But I fancy we are all inclined to endorse his opinion as to the worthy mistress for Argyle," she added, looking at Irma with a smile. "I only hope, my dear, that you like your new inheritance as well as the inheritance suits you."

Irma threw out her hands with one of her graceful gestures.

"It is like a dream, — like something which will be gone to-morrow," she said. "I have no sense of its belonging to me or of my belonging to it."

"I understand," said Mrs. Royal Smith. "Every-

thing here is so strange that of course you cannot yet feel at home. But give yourself time to make a few friends, and give your friends opportunity to prove how much they appreciate you, and perhaps you will learn that there are worse things than being — heiress-regnant, let us say. But those people yonder are absolutely beginning to return. It says much for the work of art at which they have been gazing that it has detained some of them so long. Now I will have the pleasure of seeing it; for I cannot endure to look at anything together with a crowd. Yon can come with me, Mr. Hastings; and we will go before we are overwhelmed with the torrent of their admiration."

"May I ask what it is that we are to see?" Hastings inquired, as he rose obediently and crossed the floor by her side.

"We are going to see a statue which is the work of my old friend, Gilbert Darracote."

"What! Did you know Miss Darracote's father?"

"Why not? He was not a man who cared for social recognition, but he was not in the least a recluse, and I never knew him fail in cordial welcome of a friend. The most charming of men, and a rare genius, but with not an ounce in him of the thing which makes for popularity. Ah, well!" with a sigh, "he has gone where such popularity does not matter; and, fortunately or unfortunately, it never mattered to him."

"Unfortunately, I should say, if his powers were indeed so great," remarked Hastings. "I presume, then, that what we are to see is a statue of which Miss Darracote spoke to me the other day — his last work, I think she said."

"Yes; and here it is!"

They paused, for a moment — charmed and mute. Hastings, on his part, was also amazed. He had taken with liberal allowance all that had been said of Gilbert Darracote's genius, having the profound conviction that what was unrecognized was likely to be greatly exaggerated. But here was a proof not to be gainsaid by any one with even the faintest knowledge of art.

"But it is wonderful!" he said at last in a tone of astonishment; and then his companion astonished him still further by something like a burst of emotion.

"It is divinely lovely!" she cried, and in her voice was the sound which the French call *larmes de la voix*. "And it is just what I always knew that he could do if he would — express the spiritual better than any one else. For that is what it is; don't you see? It is not merely a beautiful girl posturing as a nymph. It is Psyche — it is an embodiment of the soul."

"It is also a beautiful girl," said Hastings, "for it is an admirable likeness of Miss Darracote."

"So it is," agreed Mrs. Royal Smith. "And that is what she meant — poor child! — when she spoke of having been closely associated with him in its production. There seems something very pathetic in his having modelled her as Psyche, just before the great change in her future, just before fate brought her to such a life as this."

"From your tone," said Hastings, "one might imply that you do not think there is much scope for the soul in this life."

"And is there?" she asked, turning toward him.

"You and I, who have lived in it all our lives, and could not exist anywhere else, do we not know how little place for the soul there is in it? And when one thinks of that beautiful, poetic creature" — she pointed to the white, radiant figure — "caught in it and dragged down to its standards and ideals, what can one feel except that the old Greek myth will find a new and perhaps a pitiful rendering?"

"But why anticipate anything so tragic? Why should not our Psyche float above those things, instead of being caught and dragged down by them?"

"Because she is young," was the reply; "because she is alone; and, last and strongest reason of all, because she is a woman. You know what power it is which crushes Psyche and harnesses her to his car."

"I suppose I remember my classics well enough to guess that you mean Love. But again, why should he crush and harness her? Why should not Psyche — and such a Psyche! — lift him into higher regions?"

"That is so likely, is it not?" said the woman of the world, with a sarcastic smile. "No, I see so plainly what will be the inevitable result that, thinking of my old friend and all his ideals, and thinking also of the nature he formed — which must choose between changing all its standards or being crushed by forces too great for it, — I wish with all my heart Richard Darracote had found another heir. It would have been far better if he had left his fortune to *you*."

"In which case you think that I would not need to scheme for it," Hastings replied, with a smile as sarcastic as her own. "I understand your fears, my dear Mrs. Smith; and although I do not flatter my-

self that any assurance of mine can allay them, I feel bound, nevertheless, to tell you that it will never be by any act of mine that the Psyche whose charm we both recognize is dragged down, crushed, or harnessed, as you forbode."

Their eyes met, and for a moment each looked steadily at the other. Then Mrs. Royal Smith shrugged her shoulders.

"What will be will be," she said. "Neither you nor I can alter that. I believe you are sincere; but you can no more change issues which are to be than you can change what you are or what she is. If you were wise — but there! who is wise?"

"Nobody," he answered; "but there are degrees in unwisdom. What degree do you advise me to avoid?"

"If it were worth while to advise — which it is not — I would advise you to avoid association with a nature so different from your own that sympathy is impossible between you, and to which you can only bring disappointment and pain."

"Your opinion of me, then, is so hopelessly low?"

"No. As a man of the world I like you, and I think you much better than most of your class. But the difference between a man of the world and *that*" — she pointed again to the Psyche — "is so great and so irreconcilable that nothing can result from any attempt to blend things so unlike save what I have said."

Again their eyes met, and now there was something in his glance like a faint shade of defiance.

"I think," he said, "that we have no alternative but to leave Psyche herself to decide the point."

Mrs. Royal Smith's lip curled.

"As if, from the beginning of time, Psyche has ever decided the point except in one way!" she answered. "But why discuss the matter? After all, it is no more in your hands than in mine. It is *Kismet*."

Then she turned and walked away from him.

VI

WHEN there had first broken upon Margherita the dreadful alternative that she must either separate from the child of her love, or else accompany her to an unknown, distant, and presumably barbarous country, great had been her distress. And on no point was it more acute than on that of fear that there were no "Christians" (for an Italian recognizes no other Christian than the Catholic) in this country, whence proceeded, as she knew well, so many of those who wandered, disdainful and uncomprehending, about the sanctuaries of her native land. To the credit of her affection and faithfulness, however, she did not for an instant entertain the idea of suffering Irma to go without her; although she was little if at all convinced by the assurances she received that churches — true churches of the inviolable faith of Rome — existed, nay, even abounded, in these remote regions. It may be imagined, therefore, that her relief and joy were great when, looking from the window of her chamber on the first morning after her arrival at Argyle, Margherita discerned, in the midst of the

beautiful, undulating country which spread beyond the grounds, an upsoaring spire, and on that spire the gleam of a golden cross.

Not an instant's doubt occurred to her regarding the faith which this cross indicated. So, asking no question of any one, she sallied forth; and, after a much longer walk than she had expected, found herself at the door of a church, where on entering all doubts, if she had felt any, would have been set at rest by the sound of the familiar Latin words of the Mass; for the priest was at the altar.

An hour later, with a face like sunshine, she trudged back to Argyle, where Irma, alarmed and anxious, was making inquiries for her, and fearing that an access of homesickness had possibly overwhelmed her and caused her to wander away — Heaven alone knew where. It was an immense relief when she appeared, radiant with childlike delight.

"I have found it, *carissima!*" she cried. "I have found it — a beautiful little chapel of Our Lady of the Angels! You were right when you said that there were churches — real churches — in this country. And the priest can speak Italian, for I talked to him after the Mass; and when he heard who I was, he asked, with much surprise, if you were a Catholic; and when I asked him what else he thought you could be, he only smiled and said he was glad to hear it, and that he would very soon come to see you. I told him that you would without doubt be glad to see him; although it is likely that you will have your own chaplain, like your cousin, Prince —"

"Margherita!" exclaimed Irma, half-laughing, half-vexed. "I must insist that you do not talk to people of my cousin the prince. It is absurd and I do not like it. But I am glad you have found a church, and so near to us. When you have rested, you must show me the way to it."

And so, later in the day, the two set forth together on foot, as so often in the days that were past; and, after crossing the grounds of Arygle, in a direction opposite to that of the entrance from the avenue, passed out through a small gate and found themselves in a tree-shaded country lane, which even at this season was full of the suggestion of bowery quiet and charm. In the crisp, still atmosphere and pale golden sunshine they passed under the leafless boughs; talking, in soft Italian sounds, of lands and scenes so dear, so familiar, and, alas! so far away that tears filled their eyes as they spoke. And yet to speak was pleasure, — the sad pleasure which only exiles know. So talking, so recalling to each other unforgotten scenes and memories, they followed the lane for a mile or more, and then Margherita suddenly pointed out the church of which they were in search.

With the ending of the lane the view had widened before them, — a view of an open, gently rolling country, highly cultivated, broken with clumps and stretches of woodland, dotted with residences, and here and there with villages; while in the distance the hazy outline of the city's spires and towers bounded the horizon. But near at hand, crowning a peculiarly gentle slope, was the church, to which Margherita pointed with the pride of a discoverer.

It was a simple but picturesque structure; and close beside it stood a delightful little cottage, with vine-embowered doors and latticed windows, — plainly the residence of the priest.

"I like it — it is so simple and so graceful!" Irma said, as they went up to the door, which was shaded by a deep rustic porch.

But to their surprise they found the door fastened. Disappointed, they looked at each other, tried it again, and then hesitated, uncertain what to do next.

"The priest who talked to me this morning will let us in," said Margherita, confidently. "No doubt he lives there." She pointed as she spoke toward the adjoining house, and then uttered an exclamation. "There is himself — he is coming!" she cried.

And indeed an unmistakably sacerdotal figure had just emerged from the cottage, — a short, stout, cassock-clad man, with a benign face, and silvery hair showing beneath the beretta which surmounted it. Keen, kindly eyes looked at the two figures in the church porch, and smiled a little as they turned on Margherita, who, without waiting for any other sign of recognition, broke at once into voluble Italian: relating how she had returned, bringing the signorina with her, in order that they might pay their first visit in their new home to the divine Presence that dwelt on Catholic altars; when, behold, an inconceivable thing! — the church door closed and barred, entrance impossible —

"Oh, no! not impossible," the priest said, stemming the torrent at this point. "But, you see, this is not Italy. There are many people here who are

not Catholics; especially our roads are full of a class of vagabonds called tramps. So, to prevent these people from making a loitering place of the church, and possibly desecrating it, we close the door after Mass. There is, however, a way of entrance through the sacristy, which is always open, and well known to the members of the congregation. This I will have pleasure in showing to you. But first" — he hesitated an instant and glanced at Irma — "may I be permitted to ask if this young lady is Miss Darracote?"

"Yes, Monsieur le Curé," said Irma, who had not the faintest idea what was the English equivalent for this form of address. "And it gives me much pleasure to find a church and a priest so near my new home."

"It is a pleasure very heartily reciprocated by the priest," he said, holding out his hand cordially. "We heard of your arrival, but it was a great astonishment to me to learn from this good woman that you are a Catholic."

"It seems even more astonishing to me to find myself in a country where it should be remarkable that one is a Catholic," returned Irma, smiling.

"Oh, it does not go so far as that!" he answered. "This church is pretty good evidence that there are a few of us here. But there has never been one before that I know of bearing the name of Darracote or living within the gates of Argyle." He paused a moment, and then added, as if unable to restrain the further expression of his surprise: "You are very young, my child, to have inherited such a responsibility as this great estate."

"It was all a mistake," Irma replied with perfect simplicity. "My cousin never meant to leave his fortune to me. He left it to my father. But God called him away in the very hour that he heard of it; so here am I, with all the responsibility — alone, young, unfitted for it — "

"So, no doubt, it seems to you, and might seem to any one," said the priest, kindly. "But we may be sure that God knew what He was about when He placed the burden on your shoulders and the power in your hands. With His help, you are not too young to bear the first or to use the last well. But now I will show you the way into the church, after which I shall be very much pleased if you will honor me by taking a cup of tea with me. It is a long walk from Argyle."

"I did not find it long," Irma replied; "but I shall be very glad to take a cup of tea with you, on the condition that you will soon give me the opportunity of returning your hospitality."

He smiled.

"You have not been an heiress very long," he said, "or you would not think it necessary to make conditions with regard to your hospitality. Believe me, I shall not be slow in presenting myself at the door of Argyle."

And so it came about that, after her visit to the sanctuary, Irma took a cup of tea in a room which delighted her eye as soon as she entered it, so evidently was it the room of a student and a scholar. Books lined every inch of space on the walls and covered the tables and many of the chairs, besides reposing in piles on the carpet in every available

corner. By a latticed window stood an open desk, covered with papers and surmounted by a beautiful ivory crucifix. But for the touch given by the last it would have been possible to imagine oneself in the study of a man of letters rather than in that of a priest.

And, as a matter of fact, it was both. Long before he was a priest, or even a Catholic, Albert Thorne had been a noted essayist, critic, and reviewer. His conversion, some twenty years before, had been one of the sensations of the time; and the shock to his friends was immeasurably increased when, not content with becoming a Catholic, he entered a seminary and became a priest. While they lamented his loss to the world of letters, however, there were those among his new friends and superiors who were quite determined that this loss should not be final. So after his ordination he found himself, somewhat to his disgust, appointed to the charge of a suburban parish, which was open to the reproach of being what is popularly known as "an easy berth." A few wealthy families on one side, to whose liberality the erection of the church was due, and a few laboring people from a manufacturing village on the other, made up a congregation the demands of which were so small as to leave the priest in charge with a large amount of leisure upon his hands. The newly made rector came, looked about him, surveyed the ground, and then paid a visit to his bishop. There he modestly but firmly represented that, while he was prepared to do any work, however humble or however hard, to which he might be assigned, he was not prepared to be shelved

into a quiet rural retreat where, one might say, there was no work at all to do.

"My dear Father Thorne," said the bishop, quietly, "do you not understand that I have put you in this place because it gives scope for the work you are specially fitted to do? I know that you laid your talent and your fame as a sacrifice on the altar of God. But now I ask you to take them up again and work with them for God. We have many priests who can hear confessions and administer the sacraments, and a few who can preach good sermons; but we have, in this diocese at least, only one who is a writer; and I am determined that if you fail to write, it shall not be my fault."

And to this decision, mildly but firmly, the bishop adhered.

"Try it for a year at least," he finally said. "If at the end of that time you still desire a change, I promise that you shall have it."

So to Our Lady of the Angels returned the exman of letters, and all that the bishop had foreseen came to pass. Allured by the opening of a wider scholarship than he had ever known before, and with the power of expression burning within him, the priest gathered books about him, took up his pen; and lo! twenty years passed and found him still in this quiet spot, doing the work of God as it was given him to do. In that time the size of his congregation had much increased; but there were few of his people who knew or could have been brought to understand that the priest whom they were accustomed to see fulfilling all his duties with scrupulous fidelity was also a deep philosophical

thinker, and an essayist with a European reputation. The great foreign reviews accepted eagerly all that he wrote; but in his own country his fame was confined to the class of Catholics who are lovers and readers of books; while — so narrow are the walls which enclose much of what is called intellectual culture! — those who were his warmest admirers, and in a certain sense his disciples, in the old days before his conversion to the Church, knew absolutely nothing of his present work.

And it was this man whom Irma found at her gate, as it were, and with whom she made fast friends over the cup of tea taken in his book-lined study on the day of their first meeting. They were quick in reading each other; and perhaps the surprise was equal on both sides, — on hers, to find a man of letters and wide literary culture in this priest of a small country parish; and on his, to perceive the depth of thought and elevation of purpose in this girl, so young and so lovely, on whom had fallen the weight of a great heritage. Deeply interested, they talked long of many things; and when she finally went away, the priest stood for some time in the door of his house, looking thoughtfully after her.

"What will she make of it all?" he said at last, half aloud, — "of her wealth, her youth, her beauty, her charming mental gifts? It is hard to imagine, impossible to foresee. But if she misses some of the rocks which are ahead of her, it will be only by the mercy and the help of God."

Several weeks had passed since that day, during which Irma had made many more acquaintances, and

grown, in a measure at least, familiar with her surroundings, when one afternoon she was again walking to the little church. Among other things, she had learned something of the freedom which is permitted the American girl; so on this occasion she had not summoned Margherita to accompany her, but had contented herself with the companionship of Rex. It was a perfect day for exercise, and girl and dog enjoyed the walk through the quiet lane which led to the church.

Arrived there, Irma found the door open; for it was the eve of a feast, and the priest was certain either to be in the confessional or else quietly reading his Breviary beside it, awaiting penitents. Bidding Rex remain in the porch, — where he obediently lay down, — she entered the church, and did not return for a considerable time. When she reappeared a rather surprising scene greeted her as she emerged from the door.

Seated on one of the benches which were placed on either side of the porch were an old man and a child; and standing before them, receiving and returning their friendly attentions with an air of the greatest affability, was Rex. Now, Rex was not a dog who held himself cheap, or who was ever known to respond to the advances of strangers. As a matter of fact, he severely ignored many people who had a claim to his consideration, — notably Mrs. Treherne, — and therefore his present attitude seemed to indicate either some bond of old acquaintance or a remarkable exception to his usual habits.

"Rex!" said Irma, in a tone which expressed her surprise. And as Rex turned and came toward her

with a shade of apology in his manner, the old man before whom he had been standing rose to his feet with an air of agitation.

"Have I — do I — is this Miss Darracote?" he asked, stammering a little.

Irma looked at him and was at once struck by two things, — the first, his thin and shrunken aspect; the second, his pathetic brown eyes. She had no doubt why he wished to know who she was. Already she had learned much of the appeals for aid which beset those who are supposed to possess great wealth.

"Yes," she answered, "I am Miss Darracote. I see that my dog has made acquaintance with you."

"We have not needed to make acquaintance: we have known each other a long time," the old man said. "He often came down to the business house with his master, Mr. Darracote; and I was the person there whom he liked best."

"You knew my cousin, Mr. Darracote, then? You were one of his — how do you say in English? — employés?" Irma asked with interest.

"I was in his employ for thirty years," was the reply; "and I left it only when the business was closed at his death."

"How faithful you must have been!" said the girl, quickly and sweetly. "And now perhaps you feel the need — the want of employment?"

Wilkins — for of course it was he — shook his head.

"I miss the occupation," he said, "but I am growing old, and it is well enough to rest. Besides, I have a charge — "

He paused and glanced at the child, who remained sitting on the bench from which he had risen.

Irma's glance followed his own, and rested on a girl of eight or nine years, with a small, sallow face and a flowing mane of pale yellow hair. Something in the child's aspect — some look of unchildlike gravity and ill health — struck her attention and roused her sympathy. She put out her hand and stroked the thin little cheek with a soft touch.

"She is, perhaps, your grandchild?" she asked kindly. And then, without waiting for reply: "Has she no mother?"

"No," he answered; and there seemed something at once disquieting and fascinating to him in the sight of that slender hand touching the child's cheek, for he did not take his eyes from it. "She has no mother. She has nobody but me."

"Poor child!" said Irma, still looking at the pinched little face, out of which a pair of blue eyes solemnly stared back at her. "But, though she has no mother, I am sure she is fortunate in having you," she added, turning her own eyes again, with a great look of kindness in them, on the old man who was watching her.

He caught his breath with what was almost a gasp.

"God knows," he said, "I have not been able to do much for her, but I try — "

"Oh, you can do much, very much!" Irma returned quickly. "You do not know, perhaps, what a man can do for a motherless child, and what he can be to her. I know; for when I was younger than this child my mother died, and from that time

my father was everything to me. I felt no want: he filled my world, filled it with love and tenderness and companionship — " She paused; then, after a moment, went on, with one of the smiles which are close akin to tears: "We were such friends, he and I; and so, I fancy, are you two."

"Yes," said Wilkins, simply. And now he turned and laid his hand on the child's shoulder. "We are good friends, Lily, are we not?"

"Oh, yes!" answered the child, in a tone of indifference. Her eyes were still fixed on Irma. And, after an instant, she added: "But I am very lonesome sometimes."

"That is because she has no companions of her own age," he explained. "There are reasons why I don't wish her to associate with those who are about us; and she *is* lonely, I know."

"Would you like to come to see me?" asked Irma, looking with renewed compassion at the thin, unchildlike face. "Argyle — that is where I live — is a beautiful place, and you would find pleasure in running about the grounds. I suppose you live near here?" she added, glancing again at the old man.

And then, unconsciously, she drew back a step, amazed at the expression of his face. For what did it mean, that look which she surprised, of — dislike was it, or distrust or antagonism, or all together? But as she drew back the lids fell over the eyes which had spoken so plainly, and he answered her question.

"We live very near here," he said. "Since I am out of business, I have left the city. It is more healthy in the suburbs for the child. She is not

very robust, as you may see. And it is kind of you to ask her to go to Argyle."

"I shall be glad if she will come," said Irma. But as she spoke she felt that she had made a mistake, — how or why it was impossible to tell, — that her kindness was misunderstood, and that in some indefinable way she had given offence. She drew on her gloves and looked around for Rex. "And I shall also be glad if I can do anything for you," she added. "I feel that one who was so long in the employ of Mr. Darracote has a claim upon me."

Then, with a slight bow of salutation, and followed by the dog, she passed out of the porch.

Wilkins looked after her with an expression of almost piteous indecision. At one moment it seemed as if he would start forward and follow her; but while he hesitated the slender, black-clad figure vanished around a bend of the road, and at the same moment the priest appeared in the church door.

"I am sorry to have kept you waiting so long, Mr. Wilkins," he said. "But perhaps, after all, the delay has given you the opportunity you desired. Did I not hear you talking to Miss Darracote?"

"Yes, Father," Wilkins replied slowly; "I was talking to her, but — but I confess that I cannot understand Miss Darracote."

"Why?" the priest asked with some surprise. "Why can you not understand her?"

"I cannot understand," the other answered, "how one who seems so kind could have acted as she did when she refused to see me, or how she failed to know who I am."

"You did not tell her your name?"

"No. I was about to tell her, but her manner puzzled me so much that I broke off in what I was saying; and then it struck me that perhaps it was as well to leave it untold. The fact is" (he looked at the priest appealingly), "I lost my wits. She was so different from what I anticipated that I did not know what to do or what to say."

"Ah!" murmured Father Thorne. He sat down and smoothed his chin meditatively for a few minutes. Presently he said quietly: "I think there is one simple explanation of all that puzzled you in Miss Darracote's manner. I don't believe that she has ever heard of you at all."

"But that is impossible!" the old clerk cried. "I went to Argyle and she refused to see me."

"How do you know that she refused to see you?"

"Because the answer was brought to me directly from herself."

"By a servant?"

"No. If it had been brought by a servant, I might suppose that there was some mistake; but it was brought by a lady who kindly interested herself to see Miss Darracote, and who told me that she positively refused to see me."

"Ah!" said the priest again. "And that lady —"

"I forget her name. She was related to Mr. Darracote in some way, and lived at Argyle during his life. I met her there the night he died."

"And do you not think it possible that this lady might have deceived you and never taken your message to Miss Darracote?"

Wilkins stared for a moment, and then said slowly:

"I can't think it possible. What interest had she in the matter? Why should she have deceived me?"

"Those questions are not easy to answer," the priest replied; "but such a deception is possible; whereas in my opinion it is not possible that Miss Darracote refused to see you. I have not known her very long, but I know enough of her to be sure of that."

"If you think so," Wilkins said, with a startled look on his face, — "if you really think so, Father, I will go back to Argyle to-morrow. And I am sorry that I lost the opportunity of making myself known to her when she was here."

"Don't regret it," said Father Thorne; "and don't go to Argyle to-morrow. There is no need for haste, you know; and let us see our way clear before we move. I promise you this: that when the proper moment comes I myself will speak to Miss Darracote in your behalf, and I think you will find that I shall not speak in vain. But can you trust me sufficiently to wait patiently until, in my judgment, that moment arrives?"

Peter Wilkins looked into the benignant face beside him, with eyes which spoke of trust as well as gratitude.

"Yes, Father," he replied; "if you will do this for me, I will be patient for any length of time, and ask nothing better than to leave all in your hands."

VII

"GOOD-DAY, Miss Darracote! What fortunate chance has brought you here?"

At sound of the voice, already grown familiar to her ear, Irma turned quickly. Hastings was in the act of letting himself out of a gate which, backed by shrubbery, opened on the lane. Of his pleasure at the unexpected encounter there was no doubt. It shone in his eyes and spoke in the smile on his lips as he came forward. The girl smiled too, with a sudden sense of quickening interest.

"It is not at all a remarkable chance which has brought me," she replied. "I have been to church. But *you* — what are you doing here?"

"Something less commendable and even less remarkable," he answered, falling into step beside her as she walked on. "You don't know that these are the grounds of my cottage. The house is behind that shrubbery. A lucky impulse brought me out to see what thinning of trees and shrubs is necessary before the spring — for I never leave these things to a gardener — and behold an unexpected vision of a lady and a dog comes into sight to reward me!"

"For what?" she asked. "A reward presupposes something for which to be rewarded, does it not? Was it very virtuous of you to walk out and look at your shrubbery?"

"Not so virtuous certainly as if I had gone to church like yourself. But, then, you must remember that you are you and I am I, and our virtues must be

measured by different scales. What would be quite an indifferent act on your part might be an act of shining virtue for me. But, setting the question of reward aside, I may be allowed to congratulate myself that you happened to go to church this afternoon. There is, I know, a little Roman Catholic chapel in the neighborhood."

"Yes, at a convenient distance for a walk; and the walk itself through this quiet lane is very pleasant."

"The lane is quiet because these are private grounds on both sides; but there are possibilities of tramps loitering about, so I hope you never take the walk unattended."

"I have always before had Margherita with me, but to-day I thought Rex was a sufficient attendant. And he has, you know, the great recommendation that he does not talk."

"Rex, old fellow, do you hear that?" asked Hastings, patting the dog. "What a crushing remark to a man who does talk! I am afraid I had better return to my shrubbery."

"Oh, but you see I was thinking of poor, dear Margherita!" said Irma, laughing and blushing. "She is very fond of talking; and since I am the only person to whom she really can talk, I feel bound to give her the pleasure of talking with me as much as possible. But — well, sometimes one grows a little tired; and so to-day I thought I would indulge myself in a walk with Rex for my companion."

"I hope he properly appreciates the honor. And are you sure that you have had enough of silence, and that you do not object to a little talk now?"

"Quite sure," she replied frankly. "Indeed, I am

glad to meet you, for I should like to ask you a question."

"I am at your service to answer fifty if need be."

"One will be sufficient, I think." She turned her face toward him as she spoke; and he noted the lovely lines of cheek and chin, the ivory skin, the picturesque masses of dark, curling hair under her black hat, the mingled softness and brilliance of the dark eyes. "Do you chance to know anybody who was employed in the business house of Mr. Darracote?" she inquired.

"Yes — after a fashion, I know several of the clerks who were longest with him," Hastings answered. "Of course I don't know much about them: merely their names and appearance. Why do you ask?"

"Because I wonder if perhaps you know one whom I have just met. It was at the church door. When I came out I found Rex on the most friendly terms with an old man who was sitting in the porch. That was so unusual in Rex that it surprised me; and the man, seeing my surprise, said that they were old acquaintances, — that the dog used sometimes to accompany his master to his business, and had there known him, who was an employé of the house. I asked him if he had been long in Mr. Darracote's employ. He replied that he had been in the house for thirty years, and left it only when it was closed. Now, that seemed sad; for he is an old man, and very thin and frail in appearance, with brown eyes that have an appealing look in them."

"Peter Wilkins, by Jove!" exclaimed Hastings, involuntarily.

"Ah! you do know him, then?" said she, with in-

terest. "Is Peter Wilkins his name? He did not mention it to me. In fact, his manner was very singular. At first, when he inquired if I was Miss Darracote, I thought he was about to ask something — some assistance, perhaps. But almost immediately he seemed to disclaim such an intention, and yet he spoke and looked so strangely. Then there was a child."

"That is rather odd. Without positively knowing anything about it, I fancied the old fellow had no family. However, the child may not be related to him."

"She is, I understood him to say, his grandchild. Her mother is dead, and she has no one but him. You don't know how that touched me. It reminded me" — a mist rose into the beautiful eyes — "of my dear father and myself. So I spoke to the child, who looks very sickly and out of spirits, and asked her if she would not like to come to see me at Argyle. And then a strange thing happened — "

"What?" asked Hastings, as she paused.

"It is rather difficult to describe. I glanced at the old man, fancying he would be pleased; and I met a look — *such* a look! It seemed to express anger, dislike, offence, even enmity, all at once. No one had ever looked at me like that before, and I was very much startled. I came away quickly, and I could not but wonder what I had possibly done or said to rouse such feelings. I was wondering still when you spoke to me, and it occurred to me that perhaps you could tell me."

"No," Hastings answered; "I am as much at a loss as yourself, and as much surprised. My knowledge

of Wilkins is slight, but I should never have imagined him a person to entertain such feelings as you describe. But these things are inexplicable sometimes — I mean the enmity which is excited in a certain class of minds by any offer of kindness, or what they take to be charity, from the rich."

"But, surely," said Irma, earnestly, "it could not have been that. One cannot fancy the most sensitive person finding anything offensive in asking a child to come to see one. And I was so sorry for the poor little thing! She looked so thin and pale, and she said that she was 'lonesome.' Possibly this Mr. Wilkins feels that he has been badly treated in being thrown upon the world after thirty years of service, perhaps without any recognition of his long and faithful work. For it must have been faithful, or it would not have been so long. He should certainly have a — pension, do you not call it? That thought struck me as soon as he mentioned how many years he had served Mr. Darracote; and I should have told him that it would give me pleasure to offer him one, if I had been allowed the opportunity."

"It was a very kind and generous thought on your part," said Hastings; "but there is not the faintest obligation upon you to do such a thing. Mr. Darracote was a man who always dealt liberally as well as justly with those who served him, and this man was no doubt well paid for his thirty years' service."

"Perhaps we differ a little in our idea of what constitutes an obligation," said she, gently. "It strikes me in this way: here is a man who is now too old to work, and who gave the best years of his

life in helping to build up a great fortune in which he has no share. Surely out of that fortune there might be spared — as a matter of justice there should be spared — a sum sufficient to ensure him ease and comfort as long as he lives. It seems to me that this would have been an obligation on Mr. Darracote had he lived, and that it is an obligation on me, who represent him now."

Hastings looked at her with an air of mingled admiration and indulgence. There was nothing with which he had less sympathy than with anything that savored of what he called "socialism" — which is a word that with many people covers many things which are not socialism at all. His creed was that of the average man of the world, who finds it convenient to disapprove of charity as "pauperizing" those to whom it is extended, and who regards any demand for the equity, which in the dealings of man with man is far above mere justice, as equivalent to raising the red flag. But even genuine socialism would have had a charm for him just then, if preached by that winning voice and seconded by those eloquent eyes. Moreover, recollection of the girl's father — whom Mrs. Treherne had described as "a cross between a Socialist and a saint" — occurred to him and explained the source of her ideas. Young, generous, sympathetic, and absolutely inexperienced, was it strange she should wish to practise the theories which a father so passionately loved had no doubt preached to her?

"I am afraid," he said, "that you are going to prove a very demoralizing person. If it is known that you are prepared to pension all those who aided

in building up your fortune, you will not only be overwhelmed with applications, but you will find that it will require a large slice of the fortune to meet the demands upon it. And, after all, you will not benefit others nor win gratitude for yourself."

"Gratitude would not matter," she replied; "but why should I not benefit others? I have known many people to whom a little money would have been the greatest of benefits, and who, I think, would have been grateful for it too. But, really, nothing so general and so indiscriminate as pensioning all those who aided in building up Mr. Darracote's fortune has occurred to me. I have thought only of this old man, whose appearance and manner I cannot forget. It is impossible to resist the impression that he was in need of something — that he wanted something which it is in my power to give."

"He is, I think, rather a peculiar person: excitable, and possibly not well-balanced," said Hastings.

As he spoke, there passed through his mind a remembrance of the events in which Peter Wilkins had played a part the night Mr. Darracote died. Irma's words recalled to him the strange agitation and excitement of the old clerk, the pleading which had wrought even upon himself to such an unusual degree. And it had never been explained! Mr. Darracote, strangely enough, had consented to see the man; but no one knew what passed at the interview, and it seemed to have had no result. But was it not possible that this meeting with Miss Darracote, the manner and glance which made so deep an impression upon her, had some connection with that past event? A sudden instinct told Hastings that

it was so; that the same cause which had brought Peter Wilkins to his employer's death-bed brought him now across the path of the heiress. And, if so, what could it mean but annoyance for her, — annoyance in some form with which she in her ignorance of life would not be able to cope?

As the conviction came to him like a flash of intuition, he felt himself suddenly filled with the spirit of a defender. It should not be, he said to himself. Whatever the cause, whatever the mystery, whatever dark page there might have been in Mr. Darracote's life, as in that of many another man, no shadow from a past with which she had nothing to do should come to distress, and perhaps to torment with fanciful scruples this innocent girl. If Peter Wilkins attempted any annoyance of the kind, he should quickly learn that Miss Darracote had friends who would promptly and effectively deal with him. And meanwhile it might be well to give her a slight warning, a word of advice.

"If you will allow me to suggest," he said, "you will put this matter out of your mind. The man cannot possibly be in any need; and his peculiarities — which I now recall — are so marked that he is not at all a safe person to encourage."

"But the child!" said Irma, appealingly. "I feel so sorry for the child. And all the more because there is so little that is childlike about her. I should like to bring some smiles to her poor little, thin, discontented face."

"You will set me down as a hard-hearted monster, I fear, when I say that the only result of your kindness would probably be to make her more discon-

tented," answered Hastings. "Believe me, it does no good to give people glimpses of things which they can never possess. What has the grandchild of Peter Wilkins to do with Argyle? By showing it to her you will only make her dissatisfied with her own lot and her own home."

Irma shook her charming head.

"Not necessarily," she said. "I am positive on that point, because I speak from experience; while you, I fancy, are only theorizing. I have no more delightful memories than those of visits which papa and I used to pay to palaces and villas, where we would wander through beautiful gardens which were no more ours than Argyle would be the property of the child of whom you speak. But did that mar our enjoyment, or make us discontented with our home when we returned to it? Never for one moment. On the contrary, papa would often say, as he lighted his pipe after our return, what a very good thing it was to have only the enjoyment of those beautiful places, and not the trouble and expense of taking care of them."

"To such a convincing example I have nothing to reply, except that I am quite sure you will not find many people in the world who look at life with the eyes of your father and yourself," rejoined Hastings. "But to return to the subject of Wilkins, let me at least beg one favor of you: don't take any steps with regard to him or his grandchild until I have made some inquiries about him. I assure you that I make this request for your own protection."

"How kind you are!" she said gratefully. "It is what I should have asked if I had not feared to

trouble you too much — that you would find out something about him. In spite of your advice, I cannot feel satisfied to do nothing. But if you will make some inquiries I shall be deeply obliged."

"It is I who am obliged by being allowed to do you even so slight a service," Hastings answered.

And as he uttered the words — such words as a man of his training utters almost involuntarily to a woman — he had a passing emotion of surprise at his own sincerity.

VIII

THE day after the meeting with Irma in the lane Hastings surprised Mr. Kirby by appearing in his office. Notwithstanding this surprise, however, that busy lawyer and man of affairs greeted very cordially the man of leisure, whom theoretically he disapproved and personally liked. "Sit down," he said, "and let me know what I can do for you."

"As briefly as possible, I suppose," Hastings responded. "I know that an idler like myself is an object of suspicion, but I have not come to trouble you without a reason. I want to ask a question on behalf of Miss Darracote."

"Ah! — on behalf of Miss Darracote!" repeated the lawyer. There was an immediate accession of interest in his manner, as he swung his chair around to face the man seated opposite him, — a picture, as usual, of composure and cool self-possession. "And what is the question?"

"One which will probably seem to you very

unimportant. Do you know anything of one of Mr. Darracote's old clerks whose name is Peter Wilkins?"

Hastings put the question carelessly enough, but the name with which he concluded had hardly passed his lips when he saw in Mr. Kirby's face that he did not consider it unimportant. A sudden and grave change came over the lawyer's countenance.

"Has Miss Darracote seen Peter Wilkins?" he asked, in his turn.

"She met him yesterday," Hastings answered; "and something in his manner made such a deep impression upon her that when I saw her soon afterward, she asked me if I knew anything about him. Of course I could give her little information; but I tried to dissuade her from an intention she had conceived of offering him a pension, on the ground of his thirty years' service with Mr. Darracote."

"Tut, tut!" said Mr. Kirby, impatiently. "She has no reason to do anything of the kind."

"So I represented to her, but I fear with little success. There was also a child who seemed to have roused her sympathy very much —"

"What!" interrupted the lawyer. "Had Wilkins a child with him?"

"Yes: his grandchild, so he said or she supposed. Pitying the child's appearance, Miss Darracote asked her if she would not like to visit Argyle; and then something singular occurred. She glanced at Wilkins and met a look which she describes as expressing resentment and even absolute enmity."

"Where did this meeting take place?"

"At the door of a small Catholic church in the neighborhood of Argyle. The meeting seems to

have been altogether accidental; but Wilkins addressed Miss Darracote, and she is certain that he had some request which he wished to make. When she described the man's appearance and manner, the description at once recalled to me the extraordinary scene which he made on the night of Mr. Darracote's death. You remember having heard of it?"

Mr. Kirby nodded.

"It strikes me, therefore, that Wilkins must be mentally unbalanced or else that he has a knowledge of some episode in Mr. Darracote's life which is of a nature to make him think his silence worth buying. In either case, Miss Darracote should be protected against him; for her generous impulses, combined with her inexperience, render her particularly liable to become the victim of such a person."

Hastings uttered the last words in the tone of one who expects an unhesitating assent, but Mr. Kirby did not answer for a moment. He sat silent, in an attitude of consideration, — his brows drawn together and the fingers of one hand lightly tapping on the desk beside him.

"I agree with you that Miss Darracote must be protected," he at length said, "although neither of your opinions with regard to Wilkins is correct. He is not mentally unbalanced, and he is not trying to levy blackmail on any discreditable secret. He is simply, and I believe disinterestedly, trying to secure justice for a person whom he considers wronged."

"And who is that person?"

"One whom he believes to be the natural heir of Mr. Darracote. There is no reason why I should not tell you the story, as he told it to me after Mr.

Darracote's death; for it will become a matter of public knowledge if he decides to carry the claim into a court of law. Briefly, then, you are probably aware that Mr. Darracote was married twice — his first wife dying when he was quite a young man, before he came to this city or made his fortune?"

"Yes," Hastings answered. "I have heard my father mention the fact; and also that there was a daughter who made some marriage which he considered disgraceful and never forgave."

"She eloped, while at school, with an actor, and the circumstances of the elopement as well as the character of the man were, I gather, so particularly bad that Mr. Darracote was justified in sternly repudiating her. At all events, he did so; and she at once went on the stage, where she was successful as an actress. With her husband, she drifted out to Australia, and there the man disappears from the story. In the usual theatrical fashion, they disagreed and parted. She married again and yet again — Heaven only knows how often! Finally, while still enough of a popular favorite to have kept her from troubling her father, she died. Soon after a man appeared here, claiming to have been her last husband, and bringing a child with him who he declared was hers. To this man Mr. Darracote said: 'With you I have nothing to do. You have not the faintest claim upon me. But if you can bring me satisfactory proof that the child of whom you talk is really my daughter's, I will provide for her. Assertions amount to nothing. Understand that I must have *proof;* and if you cannot produce it, there is not the least need for you to trouble me again.'

This was his ultimatum, and we, who knew him, can imagine how unbending he was in maintaining it."

"That is easily imagined. But where does Peter Wilkins enter the story?"

"Just at this point. He met the man and child — how or where is a detail which does not matter — and had his sympathies very much excited. The man, it seems, was dying of consumption, and was, or professed to be, very anxious about the future of the child. Wilkins listened to his story and undertook to approach Mr. Darracote again. He was met by the same reply: 'I will run no risk of rewarding imposture. Either bring proof that the child is what he claims, or do not come to me again.' So Wilkins went to work to obtain if possible the necessary proof.

"Meanwhile the man — Vidal, I believe, was his name — died; and the child being destitute, Wilkins took charge of her. According to his own account, he has left no means in his power untried to prove that she is what he believes her to be. He was not able to send an agent to Australia, but he wrote unceasingly; and whenever he obtained anything which he regarded as proof he carried it to Mr. Darracote. But nothing which he obtained was of a convincing nature, and finally Mr. Darracote forbade him to mention the subject to him again. So matters went on for a considerable time, until at last Wilkins received an affidavit from a woman whom, by means of letters, he had long sought, which he regarded as conclusive evidence of the child's parentage, and which he hoped would appear so to Mr. Darracote. But when the paper arrived Mr. Darracote was dying.

Nevertheless, out to Argyle rushed Peter Wilkins; and you, who met him that night, will remember his passionate appeal to be allowed to see the man whose end was so near."

"I remember that it impressed me so much that I carried his message to Mr. Darracote, who consented to see him," said Hastings. "But he could not have regarded the proof as conclusive, for nothing came of the interview."

"You forget. Much came of it. I was sent for in haste, but before I reached Argyle Mr. Darracote was dead."

"And from the fact that you were sent for, do you believe that he accepted the proof?"

"No. He was too clear-headed a man for that — I mean to accept it absolutely. But I believe that for the first time, probably, he began to think it possible that the child was really his grandchild. From my knowledge of his character — of his strong sense of justice and his highly developed cautiousness — I think that what he intended was to add a codicil to his will, directing that the matter should be thoroughly looked into; and that, in case the necessary proofs of the child's parentage were found, she should be properly provided for. That is what I should have expected Mr. Darracote to do, and what Peter Wilkins thinks that he meant to do."

"It is a strange and certainly a very unexpected story," said Hastings. His composure of manner was unmoved, but in his eyes surprise and many other emotions were shining. "What is the legal aspect of the case? — what does the claim amount to as it stands?"

"Very little — and very much," Mr. Kirby answered. "That sounds oracular, but my meaning can be easily explained. The proof offered is at present insufficient to establish the child's claim. But it is amply sufficient to found a lawsuit upon, which might last for years. Of course, when Wilkins came to me I gave him no encouragement whatever. But he has only to go to another lawyer to be assured that he has a good chance to succeed if he carries his case into the courts. Evidently, however, he hesitates to take this step, and has decided to appeal to Miss Darracote for what he conceives to be justice."

"If he is allowed to do that, you will probably be summoned by Miss Darracote to make out the necessary legal documents for transferring the estate from herself to this waif and stray of a child."

"Hardly," said the lawyer, with an incredulous smile. "She is very young, and no doubt generous, but she is not likely to carry generosity to such a point as that. She might, however, wish to do more than is at all advisable or necessary, — that I readily believe, — and therefore some steps should be devised for her protection. Now, the question is, what steps are likely to be effective?"

"Only one possible plan occurs to me," said Hastings. "Let Peter Wilkins know that you will send an agent to Australia to examine into the proof of the child's parentage, on the condition that in the meantime he does not approach, address, or in any way trouble Miss Darracote."

Mr. Kirby glanced keenly at the speaker.

"A very good plan," he said. "But I need scarcely

remind you that means are required to send an agent to Australia."

"Draw upon me for the means," was the quiet reply. "I shall regard it as a small return for Mr. Darracote's liberal bequest to me, if I am able to settle this matter, which cannot be left in its present condition."

"It is the only wise thing to do, and should have been done long since by Mr. Darracote himself," said the lawyer. He paused and drummed again for a moment with his fingers on the desk. "But you must be prepared for the possibility that the proofs of the parentage may be found," he suddenly added, in a warning tone.

Hastings smiled as their eyes met.

"I understand that," he said. "But if the proofs exist they will sooner or later come to light; for it is only a question of time when Peter Wilkins will bring the claim to the notice of some one who, as a matter of speculation, will provide all the means necessary. It is better, therefore, to know the truth at once. When we *do* know it, you can go to Miss Darracote, lay the facts before her and advise her how to act. Under such circumstances it is possible that she may listen to your advice. But if the matter is brought to her knowledge by Wilkins, her sympathies worked upon, and certain quixotic ideas which she has aroused, it might be impossible for you or any one else to prevent her from throwing away her fortune."

"I must believe that you are mistaken," said Mr. Kirby. "I have seen nothing in the young lady that could lead me to think her — well, in plain language,

such a fool. But, putting aside any question of what she might be led to do, it will certainly be well to save her from annoyance. So I will send for Wilkins, and put him under strict bond not to molest her."

"Send for him immediately," said Hastings, with emphasis. "It was a mere chance which prevented his addressing her on the subject yesterday; but, with the encouragement which she gave him, he may go to Argyle at any time. And if he sees her, precaution will be too late."

"I shall lose no time," replied the lawyer. He hesitated a moment, glanced doubtfully at the other, who began to draw on his gloves, and then said, a little hastily:

"I am sure, Mr. Hastings, that as an old friend of Mr. Darracote, and one well acquainted with his wishes, you will let me say that I am glad to think that this interest in Miss Darracote means that you are disposed to realize his hope with regard to both of you."

Hastings looked up with slightly elevated eyebrows.

"I was not aware," he said, "that Mr. Darracote mentioned the hope to which you allude to any one beside myself."

"My business with him on the night of his death," said Mr. Kirby, "was to write at his dictation a letter to his cousin, Mr. Gilbert Darracote, fully setting forth his wishes on the point. It cost me, I assure you, a great deal of anxious thought to decide what disposition to make of that letter after I heard of the sudden death of the man to whom it was addressed."

"And what disposition did you make of it?" asked Hastings.

The lawyer pointed to a box, labelled "Darracote," in a pigeon-hole before him.

"It is there," he said. "Strictly speaking, I was perhaps bound to turn it over to Mr. Gilbert Darracote's daughter. But, knowing its contents, I could not bring myself to put it in her hands. And, frankly, Mr. Hastings, I was considering your interests in refraining from doing so. I was determined that for your own sake, as well as on account of Mr. Darracote's wishes, you should have a fair field; and, unless this young lady is unlike most of her sex, the request made in that letter would have had an effect upon her contrary to that which Mr. Darracote desired."

"I should hardly have credited you with so much knowledge of feminine perversity," said Hastings, with a gleam of amusement in his eyes. "I am obliged for your consideration of my interests, but you seem to have taken my intentions very much for granted."

"How was it possible for me to do otherwise when I saw Miss Darracote?" asked the other. "I am an old man, but I have never seen a more beautiful or a more charming girl. And when to such attractions the great Darracote fortune is added — well, really, Mr. Hastings, I should have to entertain a much lower opinion than I do of your sense to imagine that there is any hesitation on your side to comply with the earnest wish of our old friend."

The genuine kindness and interest of the speaker's tone conquered Hastings' reserve. After all, a man who knew so much might be permitted to know a little more, if only as a reward for his exercise of discretion with regard to the letter.

"You are right," he said frankly. "It is impossible to see Miss Darracote and not feel that her fortune is a very small part of her attractions. I made no promise to Mr. Darracote, and certainly no resolution to myself, regarding his wishes; but I may say to you candidly that I had little idea of being able to fulfil them — until I met Miss Darracote. Since then I have felt that I shall be a fortunate man if I am permitted to fulfil them. But this is a point still altogether in doubt. As matters stand, I do not wish her to be troubled and annoyed by any knowledge of Wilkins' threatened claim. *Now* I have no right to advise and no influence over her, and there is no doubt that if the matter came to her knowledge she would act with quixotic generosity. By means of the delay we have planned, I may obtain both the right and the influence which are lacking now, and the final disposition of the claim may be left in my hands. You will agree with me that it is worth sending a man to Australia to gain this end."

Mr. Kirby nodded his worldly-wise head.

"Very well worth it," he said emphatically. "Business arrangements should never be in the hands of women. They always incline to one extreme or the other, — are either too generous or too penurious. We must endeavor to save Miss Darracote's fortune for her — if necessary against herself. You may depend that after I have seen Wilkins he will carefully refrain from troubling her. And, fortunately, it is a long distance from here to Australia."

IX

"I SOMETIMES wonder," said Irma, "if it falls to the lot of many people to find themselves mistaken as often as I do."

Her tone was slightly rueful as well as meditative, and Mrs. Lawton laughed. They were sitting together before the library fire, and had advanced very far on the road of confidence and intimacy, as might readily have been foretold that they would.

"I have known only a few people in my life who did not make mistakes, many and often," Clare said. "The exceptions — the admirable people who in their own opinion never make mistakes — I have found it best to admire at a distance as remote as possible."

Irma laughed also, but her expression remained unchanged.

"I know that human nature is not infallible," she said, "but I really cannot believe that other people make mistakes with such distressing frequency as I do. The result is a degree of humility which may be salutary, but is not agreeable."

"We are told that humility is good for the soul," said Mrs. Lawton, "but I think that an excess of the virtue tends to render one self-distrustful, and self-distrust produces timidity. It is the old story, — we must beware of the defects of our qualities. I doubt very much if you make more mistakes than other people. You have only not grown accustomed to making them. What particular mistake are you regretting now?"

"One of presumptuous judgment. When I came here I believed that I should find nobody of whom I could make a friend. I fancied that everybody belonging to this new world into which I had entered would be like those whom I had already seen, and therefore that I could have nothing in common with any of them. Yet within a month I have learned my mistake."

"It was not only a very natural mistake, but it is one which you won't repeat," said Mrs. Lawton. "There are some things in life that one learns once for all. No matter how many strange worlds you enter after this, you will not form judgments about them before knowing them, nor generalize widely from particular instances."

"I generalized a little too widely, that is all," said Irma. "I have not the least reason to change my opinion of the world as a whole. I only forgot to provide for the possible exceptions. So I am served better than I deserve in finding — or should I say making? — a friend like yourself so soon."

"Frankly, I think it was as much finding as making," the other answered, with her exquisite smile, — a smile which converted a plain face into a fascinating if not a beautiful one. "I was so much interested in you, even before I saw you, that I was more than ready to be your friend if you would allow me. I told Mr. Hastings so."

"Ah!" cried Irma, quickly. "Then that is what he meant when he said there were friends waiting to welcome me, and I — I was odiously ungracious and rude in my reply."

"I can't believe that."

"It is true, nevertheless. I said there might be possible acquaintances awaiting me, but I did not believe there were any friends. Was not that ungracious?"

"It was not very encouraging, certainly, to Mr. Hastings. But since you were not at that time aware of my existence, you could not have meant to snub *me*, so I have no difficulty in overlooking it."

"It was ungracious and rude and very presumptuous," said Irma, with an air of severely rebuking a culprit. "Mr. Hastings was very good to offer his own friendship after such a remark?"

"Very good indeed," said Mrs. Lawton, with an expression of amusement. "But, like myself, he had determined to be your friend, and therefore snubbing had no effect on him. I can't understand, however, why you should have made up your mind so sternly against possible friendships."

"Can't you?" said the girl; and she seemed to shrink from some recollection as from a physical pain. "Then I ought to tell you, in order that you may understand, that you may not think me narrow-minded and prejudiced as well as foolish."

"My dear, I could not possibly think you any of those things."

"If I had talked in that way without knowing, I should have been all of those things. But you see I *did* know — at least I thought I did. For five months I had been forced to meet and in a degree to associate with people with whom I had not a single thought, experience, or taste in common."

Mrs. Lawton had a quick thought of Mrs. Treherne and her associates. She took one of the small hands near her.

"I understand perfectly," she said. "Do you think I don't know what those five months must have been to you? Poor child! And even in Paris had you no friends of your own?"

"Oh, yes. Although Camilla — that is my cousin — was obliged to go away in order to make her *début*, a few of my father's old friends came to see me now and then, but they almost seemed like strangers, and I am sure I was like a stranger to them in the atmosphere in which they found me. They were constrained, and talked platitudes, and I was cold and indifferent — grief makes one so, you know — and then they hurried away, and soon we went away too, — to Switzerland. I was glad to go anywhere away from Paris."

Mrs. Lawton stroked gently the hand she held, and said, "Poor child!" again. After a moment Irma went on:

"Is n't it wonderful what different worlds can exist in the same place, never touching, knowing no more of each other than if they were in separate planets? When I went out I saw the familiar streets and buildings, and I knew that I was in Paris, but the very familiarity of these things made the strangeness of everything else greater. Do you suppose that if I were suddenly transported to — China — let us say, I could ever again feel such a difference of environment, of thoughts, standards, objects in life, as I found when I left my father's world for what is called the American colony in Paris?"

"I don't really believe that you could," said Mrs. Lawton. "I think I appreciate how deep the differences were."

"Oh!" — The interjection signified inexpressible things, — "deeper than you can imagine, for to imagine rightly you would have to know more than you possibly can of the world I left. It was something like what was put before Clovis, to burn what he had adored and to adore what he had burned. There was just such a *bouleversement* of standards and ideas placed before me, only I was not, like Clovis, bound to adopt it. Think for a moment of only one difference, — the greatest, perhaps. All my life I had heard money held in contempt; I had heard my father say that nothing was so degrading as the love of money, nothing so dwarfing to character as work solely directed to the accumulation of money, and nothing so hopeless as making money a standard of value for anything. Neither he nor his friends ever did so. Most sincerely, most honestly, they held mercenary objects in scorn. Fancy, then, what I felt when I found myself in a world which simply bowed down and worshipped wealth, where everybody was valued by the amount of money which he or she possessed, where everything was rated according to the same standard, where the clink of gold seemed to be sounding in one's ears all the time, where each person was trying to outshine the others in display, and where one felt as if one wanted to cast away everything and put on sackcloth, as a protest against such rampant, overwhelming worldliness, such mercenary ideals."

"Ah!" murmured Mrs. Lawton. It was softly uttered, a comment to herself on the revelation of character which this outburst contained. "Yes," she assented, "I fancy you were quite ready to put on

the sackcloth, and give away your fortune to the first comer. But it won't do, my dear, we can't allow anything of the kind. You must keep the fortune and show the world, as a few others have done before, how wealth can be made to serve noble uses. I grant that this is a lesson a plutocracy is slow to learn. One has often occasion to remember the noble saying of De Maistre that 'the chief use of an aristocracy is to preserve in a state the presence of something more precious than gold.'"

"How often I have heard my father quote that, and say that a state in which nothing was held more precious than gold was doomed to ruin by the corruption of its worship of wealth."

"Your father was evidently a wise man, and it is for you to point the lesson of his teachings. I am sure that you will do so, and that you will not again make the mistake of thinking that there are no exceptions to certain general rules."

"If I ever thought so, I have learned the contrary in a manner I am not likely to forget. I came here, full of prejudice against every one I was likely to meet, and already I have found three — four friends: first yourself, for whom I am deeply grateful; then Father Thorne, and Mrs. Royal Smith — "

"I am glad you include her. I have always thought that she could be truthfully defined as a woman of the world who is not a worldly woman. The difference is vast."

"I can never forget her kindness to me, nor the manner in which she spoke of my dear father. And then — Mr. Hastings."

There was a short silence. The fire filled it

with the soft sounds of its flames playing about the dry logs on the great, glistening brass andirons. Presently Mrs. Lawton spoke in a tone of reflection:

"So you like Gerard Hastings! Many people would think that strange, but I don't. I have always known there was a side to his character which he does not show the world, and it is that side, no doubt, which he has shown you."

"Don't you think that most of us have more than one side, and that unconsciously we show that which will prove most agreeable to those whom we meet?" Irma asked. "It is n't insincerity — I think people are sometimes accused of being insincere when they really are not so — it is rather a natural instinct. And character is often so complex. Now Mr. Hastings — Mrs. Treherne says that he cares only for his own pleasure and interest, for what is called social success, and for fascinating women, with no other end than the gratification of his own vanity."

"Oh, Mrs. Treherne — " Clare suddenly paused. Should she give this girl a hint of the reason why Eleanor Treherne's opinion of Gerard Hastings was particularly open to doubt? A moment's reflection decided her not to do so. One less quick of perception than herself might have perceived elements of danger in the situation with which it was not wise to interfere. "Mrs. Treherne," she went on, "is one of those people who read every character in the light of their own. I should be as slow to accept her opinion of any one else as I should be sorry to be judged by it myself."

Irma smiled. At that instant she recalled some words of Mrs. Treherne about the speaker. "Mrs.

Lawton!" she had said. "Oh yes, it is quite the fashion to admire her inconsolable devotion to the memory of her husband, but in my opinion it is all simply a pose. If it were genuine, she would not care so much for the admiration of other men, and she would not let Harry Rapier devote himself to her as he does. Can't prevent that, perhaps? Bah! A woman never has any trouble in preventing anything of the kind, if she wishes to do so. But women like Clare Lawton *don't* wish to prevent it. They enjoy the incense, while affecting to be indifferent to it." Truly Mrs. Treherne, like many of us, did indeed "read every character in the light of her own."

"If I accepted that opinion of Mr. Hastings," Irma said quietly, "I certainly should not include him in my list of friends. But I don't accept it. In some degree, no doubt, it is true; but there are other things in his character, and it is by those other things that I prefer to judge him."

"And you are right," said Mrs. Lawton, warmly. "There are some very good and very unusual things in his character, although he does not show them to everybody, nor even to many people. But I have known him a long time, and — well,

> 'God be thanked, the meanest of his creatures
> Boasts two soul-sides, one to face the world with,
> One to show a woman —'

Dear me, Mr. Hastings! What do you mean by startling people by stealing upon them like this?"

"A thousand pardons!" said Hastings, as he came forward into the circle of firelight. "But I must make Ellis share the blame of my startling you. When he admitted me he whispered with a confidential air that

I would find the ladies in the library. I could not resist taking advantage of the tip, but I apologize if I have interrupted any secrets."

"Women never talk secrets except with their back-hair down, at the hour of bedtime and in the strict seclusion of their chambers," said Mrs. Lawton. "We were discussing character, its complexities and contradictions, and I was quoting Browning about the 'two-soul sides' which every man possesses."

"'— One to face the world with,
One to show a woman when he loves her,'"

Hastings quoted. "That sounds very well, but its application has earned for many a man the charge of insincerity."

"I was just saying," Irma remarked, "that any character with many sides to it is open to that charge — which is often undeserved."

"Often very much undeserved," Hastings said with some energy. "I know how it is with myself. People affect me so differently that I am, for all practical purposes, a different person with A. to what I am with B. Yet when on some occasion A. and B. compare impressions of my character, one or the other, or perhaps both, are likely to think that I am exceedingly insincere."

"When they ought to understand that you are a mental chameleon, taking color from the person you come in contact with," laughed Mrs. Lawton. "I am afraid that excuse will not serve with those who know you best. We'll grant the two soul-sides, but apart from that I have never known any one less chameleon-like than yourself."

"Which only goes to prove how little one's best friends know one," he returned. "And besides, your comparison is incorrect. One does not take one's color from other people, like the chameleon, — which I have always thought a very contemptible, time-serving animal, — but one simply shows that side or phase of one's character which is sympathetic to the person with whom one chances to be associated."

Mrs. Lawton lifted her hands.

"That I should hear you advancing a claim to be sympathetic! You will be stating next that you are impulsive and enthusiastic."

"I could never have believed that you would be so incredulous of my good qualities," said he, reproachfully. "I appeal to Miss Darracote. She shall say whether or not I am sympathetic."

"She shall say nothing of the kind," interposed Mrs. Lawton, before Irma could speak. "Her testimony cannot be received, for she came here so deeply prejudiced against us that in the course of a natural reaction she is now prepared to exaggerate any crumbs of sympathy we have offered her."

"I consider it a very unfair use of confidence to turn it against one like this!" Irma said, almost as reproachfully as Hastings. "I did not come here 'deeply prejudiced.' I simply did not expect to find all that I have found in the way of friendship and sympathy — although if I talk much more of sympathy you will begin to think me *une femme incomprise*."

"Never!" said Mrs. Lawton, "you are as far from that type as possible. "But," she added, rising, "I must leave you and Mr. Hastings to settle how much

his claim to be sympathetic is founded on reality, for it is at least an hour since I was told that my carriage was waiting, and my coachman will be a picture of dignified protest when I go out. I rather dread facing him, but the longer I wait the worse it will be; so good-bye, and don't forget that you have promised to lunch with me day after to-morrow. Mr. Hastings, it is n't in the least necessary for you to come out with me, but I suppose it is useless to say so."

"Quite useless," Hastings replied with a smile, and they went out together. When they reached the hall door, however, it appeared that the coachman was putting his protest into action by walking his horses around the great sweeping circle of the drive, and if from afar he saw the figure of his mistress he probably thought that a slight taste of the pleasure of waiting would be beneficial to her, for he did not quicken his pace, and there was time for a few more words between the two standing on the great stone steps.

"As far as possible from *une femme incomprise*," Mrs. Lawton repeated, recalling Irma's words, "but there are some things worse than that — for herself. The real *femme incomprise* enjoys the belief that she is misunderstood and unappreciated, which is very different from starting out in life with a number of fine and lofty ideals and having them all smashed before one's eyes when they encounter reality."

Hastings looked thoughtful.

"I don't see the absolute necessity for the smashing," he said. "We must acknowledge that this is a bad world for ideals, but there are a few people who manage to carry them unbroken to the end of their lives."

"Yes," Clare assented. "If they are preserved carefully in pink cotton-wool and only brought out occasionally to be inspected and admired, they may be kept unbroken. But any attempt to use them is fatal."

"I am shocked and astonished to find you so cynical, and I may add so inconsistent, for you dare not deny that you are guilty of having a few ideals yourself."

"And don't I keep them in cotton-wool, under lock and key? You can't imagine that I would be so foolish as to bring them out for practical use. What I am afraid of is that Irma will really attempt to use hers. And in that case we shall have tragedy."

"You are a pessimist as well as a cynic, it seems. Why should there be more tragedy in her case than in that of other idealists who find it rather difficult to square ideals with realities?"

"If you ask that question seriously, you are duller than I fancied, but I don't believe that you do ask it seriously. You know that the reason why there will be more tragedy in her case is because she takes these things sincerely. With many people idealism is simply an affectation; with others it is something to be cherished as a beautiful dream, without ever expecting to see it realized. But she will expect to realize hers, and when she fails, as we know that she must fail —"

"Again let me say that I do not see the necessity. Ideals are sometimes realized, whether cynics like yourself believe it or not. You remind me of Mrs. Royal Smith, who regards Miss Darracote in the most tragic manner, and has solemnly warned me

away from her, as a possible agent of disillusion and misery."

Mrs. Lawton laughed.

"How like Mrs. Royal Smith!" she said. "I don't think so badly of you as that, but there are dangers —" She sighed. "Ah, heaven! in what are there *not* dangers in this world of inconceivable disappointment, disillusion, and pain! But some of these dangers may be avoided, and if a man has unconsciously perhaps showed only his best side to a person of such a nature as this of which we are talking, he should be careful —"

"Not to inflict a shock by any revelation of his worse side," said Hastings a little dryly, as she paused, while the carriage drew up. "We are, I think, quite agreed on that point. And let me say how glad I am that Miss Darracote has found in yourself a friend from whom she need never fear such revelations."

It was very much a repetition of this speech which Hastings made when he returned to the library, where Irma sat alone in the fire-glow, with its flush on her cheeks and a light, not from it, in her eyes.

"I am delighted that you have made a friend of Mrs. Lawton," he said. "I thought that you would find her thoroughly sympathetic."

"I am beginning to be rather ashamed of my demands for sympathy," Irma answered with a smile. "Especially since I have found so much more than I deserve, as I was telling Mrs. Lawton just before you came in."

"And I am sure that Mrs. Lawton replied that you could not possibly find more than you deserve."

"She was very far from being so flattering, and I should not have believed her if she had been. She understood that I meant it was more than I deserved for having been so incredulous of finding any."

"No one who knew what your associations had been could possibly have blamed you for such incredulity. But I felt sure that you would find yourself mistaken, and I had Mrs. Lawton chiefly in my mind in that belief. After her, at a long interval, came myself, of whom I hoped you might also make a friend."

"It was very good of you to hope it, since I was so — discouraging."

"Oh, I am not easily discouraged. I may not say, like Philip of Spain, 'Time and I against any two,' but I generally find that with the aid of time I carry most points which I really care to carry. And I was incited to persevere here, not only by your scorn —"

"I was not scornful, only incredulous."

"Well, despite your incredulity, then, of any possible good thing in the form of a friend being found in a society which worshipped Mammon and lived only for amusement — you see I clearly remember the indictment! — I determined to persevere and win your friendship, not only because I felt that it was very well worth having, but also because I had promised Mr. Darracote to do so."

She gave a quick glance of interest.

"Is it possible that Mr. Darracote spoke to you of me? I fancied that he hardly knew of my existence."

"He not only knew of your existence, but he built many hopes on you."

"Did he?" She leaned forward eagerly. "Tell

me what they were. I have often thought that if I knew of any wishes of his it would give me so much pleasure to fulfil them."

"There is one of them which is, I believe, in process of fulfilment. He was, as I have told you, very anxious that my friendly relations with the house of Darracote should continue."

"The house of Darracote, speaking through its only representative at present," said the girl, sweetly, "desires the same thing. But what else did he wish?"

Hastings looked at her with a smile. "Some day," he said, "I hope to have the pleasure of telling you all his wishes in detail, but just now I must content myself with the assurance that I believe you are in yourself all that he would have desired."

"That is more complimentary than satisfactory," she answered with heightened color. But she did not press her question further, for an instinct — or was it something in the eyes so steadfastly regarding her? — warned her not to do so. Instead, she went on quickly in a different tone:

"I think — or at least I hope — that he would have wished me to provide for any of his old employés who need assistance; so I am reminded to ask if you have found out anything about the old man — Peter Wilkins, is n't it? — whom I met the other day."

"I have found out all that there is to know about him. He is in sufficiently good circumstances, and has no need of a pension. That, I believe, is what you wanted to be assured."

Irma looked distinctly disappointed.

"I am afraid," she answered, "that I wanted to be assured that I had found somebody whom it was right to help with some of my superfluous money. Well, at all events, I can have the child here and brighten her life a little."

"I am sorry," said Hastings, with some hesitation, "that I must advise against that also. There are, I have found, reasons why it is not prudent for you to have anything to do with Wilkins or his — grandchild."

Irma gazed at him with astonishment.

"How mysterious you are!" she said. "What possible reason can there be why I should not be kind to a poor little child, even if I must not offer a pension to the old man?"

"It does seem odd that there should be a reason," Hastings admitted. "But you have just said that you are kind enough to regard me as a friend, so you will let me remind you that confidence is an essential part of friendship. As a friend, I ask you to trust me in this matter — to believe that such a reason exists."

"A reason which you cannot tell me?"

"A reason which I would rather not tell you at present. Of course, if you insist, I must; but I hope you will not insist. See now!" — and there was a tone of great earnestness in his voice — "let us make this what lawyers call 'a test case.' If you really consider me a friend, you will believe me when I say that there is a reason why it is better that you should not have any communication with this man or child. It is n't a matter of great importance, but it is a test. Words amount to little, but actions are everything. Therefore — will you trust me?"

There was a brief silence. Then the girl answered quietly, perhaps a little proudly:

"Whatever I promise I fulfil. Friendship certainly includes confidence; so I trust you."

Friendship, we know, is an old mask for Love. But he would have been dull who did not hear now the soft and delicate stirring of the wings of Eros.

X

THAT Mrs. Treherne held no place in the short list of friends whom Irma counted over would not have surprised that lady in the least. She had been clearly aware, from the first hour of their meeting, that there was no possibility of sympathy between herself and this girl who regarded *her* ideals of life with wondering scorn, and whose own ideals (as far as she comprehended them) she regarded with ridicule and dislike. The only ground on which they could meet was that of mutual toleration, and since each was in a degree necessary to the other, they both perceived and in their different ways acted upon this understanding. Each was scrupulously courteous to the other, and on Irma's side there was also a charming deference of manner and tone which pleased and sometimes even touched Mrs. Treherne, who knew how different the manner of many an heiress was toward her (paid) chaperon. To herself she could not but acknowledge the girl was exquisite — of the finest fibre within and without — a gentlewoman in every instinct, with a fine and delicate sense not only of that which was right but of that which was most

noble in conduct, and a grace of bearing and speech such as seldom flowers on any stem save that of one of the Latin races.

And surely never was heiress less trouble to her chaperon. Indeed, since her deep mourning prevented her entrance into society except to a very limited extent, and Mrs. Treherne was speedily absorbed in a constant round of social gayeties, they lived as separate lives as was compatible with existence under the same roof. Separate as they were, however, Mrs. Treherne did not fail to keep herself thoroughly informed with regard to the increasing intimacy between Miss Darracote and Mr. Hastings. It was what she had foreseen, foretold, and even desired, but nevertheless the knowledge of it filled her with a sense of anger the greater because denied all expression. Not even the belief that she held a certain power over this man — a power which was to be exercised for his injury and humiliation — was able to relieve the exasperation with which she recognized the fact that in this intimacy he was yielding as much to the charm of the woman as to the powerful attraction of her fortune.

As time went on, too, she became impatient. Why did he not speak? — why did he not act? — and why did he not take what plainly was ready to drop into his hand? She was feverishly anxious to have the matter finally settled, for no one save herself knew or could imagine what a perilous game she was playing. Peter Wilkins was quiet and gave no sign — her own success in that regard was so complete that it almost frightened her — but it was impossible to tell how long he would remain quiet. And if he did not, then

the high stakes for which she was playing, for which she had sacrificed whatever conscience remained to her, might, after all, be lost. Her impatience at Hastings' delay was therefore extreme, but she knew that to express it to him would only be to court a rebuff which he would take pleasure in making as stinging as possible.

And it was while this suspense was at its height that she heard the unwelcome news that Camilla's arrival was immediately expected. Although they had met only once or twice, she had recognized a possible antagonist -- perhaps a possible enemy — in this girl, and there could have been nothing less agreeable to her than the entrance of an influence so formidable and almost certain to be opposed to her own, into Irma's life just at this time. Her vexation indeed was so great that she was unable to control its outward expression.

"I am sorry that Miss Vincent is really coming," she said, when Irma, opening a letter one morning at breakfast, announced in a joyful tone that Camilla might be looked for in a few days. "I hoped, for your sake, that her operatic engagements would prevent her crossing the ocean."

Irma glanced up with an expression of surprise and something more than surprise, — the first trace of hauteur that Mrs. Treherne had ever seen on her face.

"I don't think that I understand you," she said.

"What I mean would be easily understood by any one with the least knowledge of the world," Mrs. Treherne replied, too irritated to be prudent. "It is simply that it would be wise to leave Bohemian associations in Bohemia."

"Do you know that you are speaking of my cousin?" Irma asked, and something in her tone now sounded a note of warning.

"Unless I am mistaken, you told me once that the relationship is very remote," the other answered, "but even if it were nearer I should feel it my duty to say the same thing. Although you have the Darracote millions, your *personal* place in society is yet to be taken, and now, at the beginning, it is so easy to make a mistake which might be very serious."

"I am dull, I suppose," said Irma, "but I fail to see what connection there is between my cousin's visit and my place in society."

Mrs. Treherne found herself provoked to very plain speaking.

"Then I must tell you," she said, "that there has been much exaggerated gossip about your Bohemian antecedents and — er — foreign relatives. The appearance of this girl — an Italian opera-singer — will seem to justify it, and will prove a great social drawback to you."

"I am sure that you do your world injustice," said Irma, quietly. "I have learned enough of it to be confident that so long as I possess the millions you have mentioned, I cannot possibly do anything which would deprive me of its favor, — not even if I introduced an Italian organ-grinder, with his monkey, as my cousin."

"Of course it is easy to be scornful and sarcastic," said Mrs. Treherne, flushing angrily, "but that does not alter the fact that Miss Vincent's appearance here will certainly do you an injury."

"Miss Vincent," said Irma, "is not only of as good

blood as myself, but in Europe her brilliant artistic success would open all doors to her. That this is not the case here is neither a matter of surprise nor of the least concern to me."

She rose from the table as she spoke; but Mrs. Treherne, recognizing that she had for once gone too far, hastened to apologize.

"You must remember," she said, "that I fill a position of great responsibility towards you, and I should feel that I had neglected a positive duty if I failed to tell you how things are regarded in a society with which you are not familiar. The way in which it regards actresses and singers may be a little narrow-minded, — personally, I have no doubt they are delightful people and not *always* lax in their morals, — but, as I often remind you, we must take things as they are, and not as one would like to find them. And I am so deeply interested in your social prospects, so anxious that you shall make the very best position for yourself, that I cannot bear for you to do anything which may endanger it."

"You are very kind," said Irma, coldly, "but since you have fulfilled the duty which appears to you so imperative, and since I have assured you that nothing could be of less importance to me than the opinion of the society of which you talk, I think we will drop the subject."

"As you like," said Mrs. Treherne.

And so, in diplomatic language, the incident was closed. The slight passage at arms seemed a trifle, but it was the first of several such trifles to assure the elder woman that she had been right in suspecting that under all her gentleness and docility Irma pos-

sessed both fire and a will with which it would not be safe to try conclusions.

And so, when a little later Camilla arrived, Mrs. Treherne was ready to give her a very suave and outwardly cordial welcome. There was, in ordinary phrase, no love lost between these two, who had already met and gauged each other with some degree of thoroughness and accuracy; but both perceived the necessity of veiling their distrust and dislike as long as they were together under Irma's roof. In fact, Camilla was too much overwhelmed by the proofs of the greatness of her cousin's inheritance to have much thought to spare for Mrs. Treherne.

"But it is wonderful!" she cried. "It is like a fairy-tale! I had no idea that you were so great a lady, Irma *mia*."

"Am I a great lady?" Irma returned. "I assure you I do not feel myself one. But I agree with you that it is all very much like a fairy-tale; and your part in it not least so."

"Oh, my part in it was always to have been expected!" said Camilla, with superb self-confidence. "I always knew I should succeed. There was never the least doubt in my mind of that. But *you*, who were brought up to scorn money, — how strange to see you mistress of this beautiful place, with a great fortune behind it!"

"You are mistaken," answered Irma, quickly. "I was not brought up to scorn money, but only the love of it, which is a very different thing. My father always said that money was a great power for good; but that so few people used the power well, so few

did not become selfish, worldly, and pleasure-seeking, that it was better not to be tempted by it."

"And, now that you have it, do you find this true — are you becoming selfish, worldly, and pleasure-seeking?"

"You know we are not aware of changes in ourselves until some test comes to show them to us. The love of all this luxury and power may be growing in me. How can I tell?"

"*I* can tell!" said Camilla, with a laugh. "You are exactly what you always were, — full of ideals too high entirely for this sordid world. Now, I have no ideals at all. I am practical and worldly and mercenary, too. Ask the *impresarios* whether or not I can make a hard bargain; and I promise you that as I grow more famous my bargains will be harder still. I always said I should make a typical prima-donna in that respect."

It was now Irma's turn to laugh.

"I know," she said, "that you always took pleasure in painting yourself in as dark colors as possible; but we knew what to think of that, — papa and I. 'It is a heart of gold that she has, the little Camilla,' he used to say; and he made no mistakes."

"Except in judging too kindly," said Camilla, shaking her head in protest.

It was the day after the arrival of the young singer at Argyle, and the two cousins had just made an exhaustive inspection of the house, ending with the drawing-room, where Camilla had thrown herself into a luxurious chair, with the cry that it was all "like a fairy-tale."

Yet, as Irma reminded her, there had been a trans-

formation hardly less great in her own life; and the stamp of it was set upon her, as the stamp of success always is. Self-assured as the Camilla of the past had been, the Camilla of the present was more self-assured still, — a radiant, confident creature, whom to see was to recognize as a person of importance. With her charming prettiness set off by the most elegant attire, she was a very brilliant butterfly indeed, fully emerged at last from the chrysalis of her Bohemian obscurity. In the pause which followed her remark, she glanced around the room with bright, inquisitive eyes, and suddenly caught the white grace of the Psyche in its recess.

"Ah!" she cried, springing up, and moving toward it. "Here is something familiar, — a bit of the old life! How it recalls everything! And how beautiful it is, and how like you!"

Irma, who followed, stood in her black gown by the side of the graceful figure, regarding it a little sadly.

"Beautiful, yes," she said. "But like me — I cannot see how it is possible to think so. *That* is an incarnation of joyousness, while I —"

"Will also be an incarnation of joyousness again — and soon, I hope!" Camilla exclaimed, throwing an arm impulsively around her. "For, after all, it is dreadful ingratitude not to be happy with this wonderful fortune."

"How can the fortune possibly make me happy?" Irma asked. "It has given me nothing that I value. And I am lonely, Camilla, — very lonely."

"*Carissima!* I am sure that you are," the other murmured sympathetically. "Who could be otherwise with only Mrs. Treherne for a companion!"

"If I had you," Irma went on; "if you would give up the stage and live with me, I think we might be very happy together. This is what has been in my mind for a long time, and I have only waited for you to come to propose it."

"Give up the stage!" repeated Camilla. The suggestion seemed to strike her like a blow. She drew back, looking at her cousin with an almost ludicrous expression of dismay. "But I am just at the beginning," she said. "And it is all before me — fame, fortune, triumph. Think how I have worked for it, and waited and hoped, and now — to give it up *now!* O Irma, ask me anything else!"

"But if I assure you all the fortune that you could possibly gain," said Irma, eagerly; "and I can do so, for it seems I am very rich, — would you not rather take it from me than to continue singing before the public, bargaining with *impresarios* — "

"But the triumph!" Camilla cried. "One hour of success pays for all. It is better than being a queen to feel that one has the power to set a whole audience wild with enthusiasm, to see them rise up and overwhelm one with applause. Oh! you forget that — you know nothing of that — or you could not ask me to give it up."

"Could I not?" said Irma. As dismay had struck the other, so a keen sense of disappointment now struck her. She had been building a castle in the air, in which she had seen Camilla and herself sharing as sisters the inheritance which had come to her, enjoying together all that it would give: Camilla relieved of all need to follow a laborious profession; herself relieved of loneliness, and happily assured of

being able to help with her wealth one whom she loved. It had been a dream on which she had dwelt with intense pleasure and with little doubt of its practical realization. Yet now in a moment she saw that it was not to be realized. Camilla had tasted triumph, and that triumph was more to her than anything she, Irma, could offer. Also, while she had need of Camilla, Camilla had no need of her, — neither of her wealth nor her companionship. The singer, in the first flush of success, with the world, by anticipation at least, at her feet, knew nothing of the loneliness which saddened the heiress' life. To her life opened an intoxicating vista of applause, homage, excitement, which left no room for any need of sympathy or affection. All this was suddenly borne in upon Irma with the force of an intuition, showing her how baseless was the dream with which she had pleased herself.

"Then I will not ask it," she said. "I had no thought of demanding any sacrifice — "

"Oh, I am sure you had not!" Camilla interposed. "You did not understand what her career is to an artist, that is all. It was your generosity, your desire to share your fairy fortune with me, which made you think of such a thing. And of course, if all this had happened a year ago," she continued, with admirable candor, "your proposal would have worn a different face; for *then* nothing was certain. I had not made my *début*, and I might have been glad to give up professional ambition and devote myself to social existence. But *now* — well, you can perhaps understand that now, with all that is before me, it would be a poor exchange."

"Then certainly I will not ask it," Irma repeated, this time with emphasis. As she spoke, the memory of her father's sayings with regard to the effect of worldly success passed through her mind, coupled with a question whether success had changed Camilla, or whether it had merely proved the touchstone to show what she had always been. Her eyes, filled with this reflection, dwelt on her cousin with an intentness which made Camilla slightly uncomfortable.

"You are thinking how mercenary and selfish *I* have become," she said. "I am sure of it. But please remember that I never pretended to be anything else. Only a moment ago I told you what I am, and you refused to believe me. Now here is the proof. You offer me ease, comfort, plenty of money, and your companionship; and I tell you that I prefer — that I must have — admiration, excitement, applause, the consciousness of power, and the money that will come to me with triumph written on every piece."

"I suppose it is natural," said Irma. "But I am disappointed, because I have been making many plans for our life together. And I am sorry. I cannot help that; for all you say makes me realize afresh how entirely alone I am in the world, necessary to no one and of use to no one."

"Nonsense!" cried Camilla, sharply. "You are necessary to every one who loves you, and you will be of use to legions. I wish I were as sure of being the greatest singer of the age as I am of that. And as for loneliness — O Irma, Irma, you are not a child! You know that, with your attractions, you will have suitors in multitudes; you will choose one

of them, and there will be no more loneliness and no more need of Camilla in your life. Psyche will waken, and then — ah, then you will be as happy as you deserve!"

"You talk of what you don't understand," said Irma, turning away.

Camilla threw out her hands.

"Who should understand if not I?" she protested. "The suitors will surely come, and you cannot be adamant to all of them as you were to poor Mr. Norbert in the old days in Paris. By the way, did I tell you that he came over on the same ship with me? How glad he was to see me! And how he talked, talked, talked all the way on one subject!"

"Is he here — in America, I mean?" Irma asked, in a slightly startled tone.

"Not only in America, but in this city, at your door," Camilla replied. "He told me that there were some of his paintings on exhibition here, and it seems they have been very highly praised. He, too, has been achieving success in a moderate degree, and plainly hopes that if he can become famous he may even venture to approach such an exalted princess as yourself."

"Why do you talk so absurdly?" Irma asked, half angrily. "Whoever thinks that I could be changed in any respect to any one, but especially to my old friends, by the accident of inheriting some money, either thinks that I have a very vulgar soul or has one himself."

"Mr. Norbert may be acquitted of the vulgar soul," said Camilla; "for I am sure he does not fear that *you* are changed. But he knows the world well

enough to be aware that your position has very much changed, while his remains depressingly the same. A struggling painter, with only his palette and brushes for his fortune, would not be considered a very suitable alliance for a great heiress."

"It would not weigh with me for an instant, the thought of what would be considered suitable," said Irma, proudly. "Nor yet the fact that he had only his palette and brushes for his fortune, if — if I cared for him as he wished that I should."

"No one who knows you could doubt that," said Camilla. "But he understands that if you did not care for him as he wished in the old days, you are hardly likely to do so now, when circumstances are so much changed. He was even doubtful whether or not he could venture to claim your acquaintance, but I assured him that he need not hesitate to do so."

"It seems," said Irma, in a deeply wounded tone, "that money must indeed have great power in changing people, since even my friends are themselves so much affected by it that they imagine I must be also. I could not have believed it. I am sure that I could never think that any one whom I know and like would be so altered by an accident of life that I could not approach her, — no, not if she inherited a throne instead of merely a little money."

"It is n't merely a little money, you know," observed Camilla, practically. "However, the principle is the same. And you must allow for the sensitiveness of a lover. If he does n't come, a word from you will bring him only too gladly."

"But why should I speak a word to one who is capable of doing me such injustice?" Irma asked.

Then she turned toward a servant who entered at the moment. "What is it, Ellis?"

The man presented a card.

"The gentleman wishes to know if Miss Darracote is at home and will see him," he said.

Irma glanced at the name.

"Show him in," she replied; and as the servant left the room, she looked at Camilla with a quick, bright smile. "After all," she said, "Mr. Norbert has found courage to come."

XI

THE young man who entered the drawing-room a moment later — walking quickly, with the air of one who is a little nervous — was in certain particulars unlike the Norbert with whom Irma had parted in Paris. For one thing, that Norbert had delighted to affect a marked Bohemianism of manner and attire; whereas this Norbert was altogether conventional and correct in both respects. Also, on him as on Camilla, although in less degree, the indefinable but unmistakable mark of success was set. For no great amount of this is necessary to change the attitude of the most defiant Bohemian from scorn of artistic and social conventions to respect and observance of the same. It was, therefore, the old Norbert of Parisian days, and yet also a new and somewhat unfamiliar Norbert, who entered with the quick, nervous bearing and a look of doubt in his eyes.

But no degree of doubt could have withstood the charm of the greeting which Irma came forward to

give him. In the change from outside brightness to the partial obscurity of the drawing-room, he failed for an instant to distinguish the figures at the farther end. So he was not prepared for the swift, impulsive approach of one of them; the two white hands outstretched, the sweet, eager, well-remembered tones crying:

"Oh, how glad I am to see you! How kind of you to come at once! We were just talking of you, Camilla and I. For here is Camilla, you see; and now we are together, — we three, — as in the dear, old, happy days!"

It is safe to say that at this moment Norbert felt himself to the bottom of his soul a Philistine and a snob. For had he not hesitated to come, doubting the reception which might be accorded him? And even up to the last moment had he not said to himself that if instead of the Irma whom he had known he found Miss Darracote the heiress, he would never trouble the latter again? And all the time it was this welcome which was awaiting him from the faithful heart he had so little appreciated!

Overcome by these thoughts, as much as by the welcome itself, he could only murmur a few inarticulate words, as Irma led him toward Camilla, and then stood looking from one to the other with eyes that shone through a soft mist of tears.

"Yes, here we are!" observed Camilla. "And let me tell you" — this to Norbert — "that it is a very good thing you have come at this moment; for I was just slandering you by saying that you hesitated to come."

"And suppose it was no slander?" said Norbert,

regarding Irma with an expression half ashamed, half appealing. "Suppose I did hesitate — thinking of the great change since we met last, and fearing to appear presumptuous?"

"I can hardly believe it. I told Camilla that I could hardly believe it," Irma replied. "What change has there been, except that I have by accident inherited a little — or, let us say, a great deal of money? But what has that to do with *me?* I cannot imagine what kind of person it would be who could be changed by such a thing."

"The difficulty is, rather, in imagining what kind of person would *not* be changed by it," said Camilla, candidly. "With most of us the change would be instantaneous, I fear. But we will acknowledge that you are not changed, and I am sure Mr. Norbert will quickly proceed to humble himself properly for ever having fancied it possible."

Norbert looked as if no degree of humbling would come amiss to him.

"I should have known better," he said, regarding Irma with the same appealing air. "But when one lives in the world and hears much of the value of external things, one forgets that there are a few people to whom those things do not matter. I know well that Mr. Darracote was such a person — "

"And yet you thought his daughter could be changed to her old friends by the possession of some money!" Irma interrupted, in a tone of fine scorn. "But there! we will talk no more of the subject. You have been demoralized, like Camilla, by too much worldly success; for I am delighted to hear that you are succeeding."

"Not to any overwhelming or necessarily demoralizing extent," he answered. "But a little — yes. It began last year in Paris, after — after the time when I lost sight of you."

"Tell me about it," she said, sinking into a chair.

"It was, in a certain sense, an accident," Norbert began, following her example, and nowise loath to talk on a subject so interesting to himself. "Among the many Americans in Paris, there chanced to be one millionaire with a taste for art. He became well known in the studios, and one day he wandered into mine. Something in my work pleased him; and, besides buying a picture or two, he asked me to paint his portrait. I was reluctant to do so; but as he was a good subject I finally consented, thinking that in any event the head would be useful to me as a study. Perhaps because I painted it with this end in view, I produced something really effective, with which he was delighted. He talked to all his friends of my power of portraying character; and since the picture had a certain merit of the kind, I suddenly found myself the possessor of a reputation and flooded with orders."

"And what did they think of it in the studios?"

"Laughed, shrugged their shoulders, congratulated me, and advised me to make the most of my vogue. Only Monsieur Dufresne had a kind and serious word for me. 'There is nothing unworthy in what you are doing,' he said. 'You possess a remarkable faculty of perceiving and catching something in a face which eludes the ordinary portrait-painter. Your likenesses, from this fact rather than from any particular brilliancy of treatment, are very effective, and I do not

wonder they have struck the popular fancy. Don't hesitate to go on and reap the harvest of your popularity, so long as you are not satisfied to rest content with this cheap success and forget the serious ends of art.'"

"How like Monsieur Dufresne that sounds!" said Irma. "He was always so kind and wise."

"I followed his advice," Norbert went on; "and when my American patrons assured me that I had only to come over here and open a studio in order to make both reputation and money, I listened — and came. Some of my pictures have been for some time on exhibition in this city; perhaps you have seen or heard of them?"

"No," Irma began — and then a sudden recollection flashed upon her. "But yes!" she cried. "It must have been of your pictures that a friend spoke to me. But no name was mentioned, and I never guessed; although I might have done so, for she said that there was a face among them which suggested mine."

Norbert flushed.

"I did not think that it would be recognized," he said, "or else I should not have included that picture in the exhibition. It was a study of your head, drawn from memory but not intended for a portrait."

"It was not recognized as a portrait. But if it had been, what then? Why should I object to your painting my face?"

"Then will you let me do so?" he asked eagerly. "It is what I desire above all things, but I feared to ask it. Think what an introduction for me, if my first sitter here is Miss Darracote!"

"Will it do you good?" she asked, all animation and interest. "Then I give you at once a commission for a portrait — no, two commissions; for I want a portrait of Camilla also. And mind that you charge your highest price for both."

"Don't ask it. The mere fact that you allow me to paint you will be material assistance enough. My reward will be in the pleasure of doing it."

"No, no!" she cried. "I will not hear of that. You must take me as a sitter on the same terms that you take every one else, or I will not sit for you at all. Think what a quantity of money I have! Why should you wish to deny me the pleasure of spending a little of it in this way? I have not many friends, and to be able to help one of them is so great a happiness that you ought to be glad to give it to me."

"Yes," said Camilla, chiming in, "you ought; and if you knew how very anxious she is to find some one on whom to spend this money which troubles her so much, you would be. I have no compunction whatever about allowing her to pay for my portrait, and you should have none about accepting the money."

Norbert looked at the speaker with an expression bordering on resentment.

"I think," he said, "that we regard the matter from very different points of view."

"There is not the least doubt of that," Camilla cheerfully rejoined; "but mine is the right point. And if you want the pleasure of painting either or both of us, you must be business-like about it. What is the good of being absurd, and losing the oppor-

tunity to show what you can do with two such subjects as Miss Darracote, the great heiress, and Mademoiselle Vincenzo, the famous prima-donna?"

Notwithstanding his vexation, Norbert could not restrain a laugh.

"Mademoiselle Vincenzo will certainly never lose anything through such absurdity," he replied.

"You mean that for sarcasm, but it is quite true," said Camilla. "Mademoiselle Vincenzo is practical above all things, and would see nothing to be gained by refusing to allow a friend the pleasure of buying something which is open for any stranger to buy. But here comes your imposing major-domo again, Irma, with another card!"

Irma glanced around, as the soft-footed Ellis reached her side, with another bit of pasteboard on his extended silver plate.

"Mr. Hastings begs that if Miss Darracote is engaged she will not hesitate to say so," was the low-toned message accompanying it.

There was an instant's silence, while Irma looked at the card and Camilla and Norbert looked at her. Then she said:

"Show Mr. Hastings in. I shall be glad to see him. And glad for both of you to meet him," she added, turning to the others. "He was an intimate friend of my cousin, Mr. Darracote; and he has become a friend of mine."

"A friend of Mr. Darracote!" repeated Camilla, her eyes turning toward a portrait of that gentleman which hung on the wall not far away. Its appearance suggested a sedate, middle-aged — or somewhat more than middle-aged — person, who might be

supposed to take a fatherly interest in the young heiress. She felt a slight sense of impatience. Why should Irma not have excused herself to an old gentleman of that type? And then suddenly her eyes opened wide with amazement as she caught sight of Hastings entering the room.

"I hope," said that gentleman, as he took Irma's hand with his most deferential air, "that you have not allowed me to disturb you in any respect."

"On the contrary," she answered; "I am delighted to have the opportunity of introducing you to my cousin, Miss Vincent, of whom you heard me speak, and who is somewhat more widely known as Mademoiselle Vincenzo."

Hastings bowed.

"I am most happy to meet Miss Vincent," he said; "and very sensible of the honor of knowing Mademoiselle Vincenzo."

"And here," said Irma, "is another old friend, — Mr. Norbert, the artist, of whom perhaps you have also heard."

"Of Mr. Norbert the artist I have certainly heard," Hastings replied. "I have not as yet had the pleasure of seeing your pictures," he went on, addressing the young man; "but I have heard much of them from some of my friends."

"And fancy," said Irma, "that I did not know until just now that he had any pictures here, nor that he had sprung into reputation since we parted in Paris!"

"Reputation is a large word," said Norbert. "For the present I can only claim a little, possibly transient, vogue."

"There are vogues and vogues," said Hastings. "Some are transient and some are enduring. The difference depends on the character of the achievement upon which they rest. From what I have heard of your work I think that yours will prove enduring. Your pictures must certainly possess some very uncommon qualities."

Norbert shrugged his shoulders with an air of indifference to this opinion. There was no possible reason why the words of the other should have displeased him, and yet they did so. To himself he said that this was because they had an accent of patronage, but the cause in reality lay much deeper. It was to be found in the personal appearance of Hastings, — that appearance which had so amazed Camilla, and which not only surprised Norbert but filled him with an immediate, intuitive jealousy. He would have been jealous of almost any one who approached Irma; but this man, youthful, handsome, distinguished, with the ease of the world in manner and bearing, was especially fitted to rouse such a feeling.

"Those who talk most of the uncommon qualities of my work are unfortunately those who know least of art," he replied, somewhat ungraciously. Then he turned to Irma: "But since you have not already seen the pictures, will you come and judge for yourself? I have taken a studio, and in a few days I shall have all of them there."

"I shall be charmed to come," she replied. "You must let me know as soon as you are ready for visitors."

"If you wish to make an effective *début*," said

Camilla, "you should open your studio with a housewarming. Invite everybody you know, and Irma and I will go and pour out tea for you."

"Will you?" Norbert asked, looking at Irma with an eager flash in his eyes.

"Of course I will," she answered readily. "That is" — as a sudden thought struck her — "I suppose there is no reason why I should not, but I am rather ignorant of social rules as yet."

She glanced at Hastings with a question in her eyes, to which he responded somewhat gravely:

"There is no reason — if Mrs. Treherne accompanies you."

"I am sure Mrs. Treherne will do so," Irma said confidently. "She is very obliging. But you must meet her," she added, addressing Norbert; "and, since she is not in at present, the best plan will be for you to dine with us this evening."

Norbert replied that it would give him much pleasure to do so; while Hastings, sitting by, was conscious of a certain amusement at his own expense. It was not only that no such invitation had ever been accorded to him, but Irma's whole manner to this young stranger was suggestive of an assurance that the latter occupied a place in her familiar regard which he (Hastings) had not yet attained. For the first time he recalled what he had once heard (without heeding) of gossip concerning "an artist lover." Plainly here was the lover in question; and plainly likewise he had the great advantage of being linked with a past which Irma regarded with passionate affection and regret.

While these thoughts were passing through his

mind, Camilla's eyes were fastened upon him, and she startled him a little by speaking suddenly:

"Before you entered, Mr. Hastings, Irma told us that you were a friend of the late Mr. Darracote; so you may imagine that your appearance very much surprised me."

"Indeed!" Hastings replied. "And may I ask what there is in my appearance which should render the idea of my having been a friend of Mr. Darracote surprising?"

Camilla glanced again at the portrait on the wall.

"Well, one naturally fancied that *his* friend," she said, nodding toward it, "would be an old gentleman like himself. I expected, therefore, some one very different, in age at least, from yourself."

"But there is no law forbidding people from having friends younger than themselves," Hastings rejoined. "I assure you that I am not an impostor. Any one who knows anything about the matter will tell you that Mr. Darracote and myself were great friends, notwithstanding the disparity in our ages. To account fully for it, however, I may mention that it was an hereditary friendship: my father was his contemporary and closest friend."

"Ah!" (Camilla was regarding him with her head on one side like a bright-eyed bird.) "That accounts for it. And this hereditary friendship is further carried on between Irma and yourself."

"I have reason to believe so. At least I am certainly a friend of Miss Darracote, and I hope that I have the honor of reckoning her a friend of mine."

"Of one thing you may be sure," said Camilla. "There never was a more loyal soul than Irma. If

she once admits you to her friendship, you may reckon upon her to any extent."

Involuntarily Hastings glanced toward Norbert, to whom Irma was talking with an animation and interest he had never seen her display before.

"So it appears," he said.

"Oh, we are more than ordinary examples — Mr. Norbert and I!" said Camilla. "You see, we were both so closely identified with her old life; and if you know Irma at all, you know how her heart clings to that life."

"And no doubt to every one connected with it," he said, with more significance than he intended in his tone.

"And also, to a certain extent, to every one connected with it," she assented, still regarding him closely with her observant eyes.

But Hastings, who had no mind to be read by this young inquisitor, at once changed the subject.

"I trust that I may be permitted to congratulate you upon the success you have achieved," he said, "and to hope that we are to have the pleasure of hearing you sing while you are in America."

"It is doubtful," she replied. "I have come only for a rest and to see Irma. There have been some proposals made to me, but it is not likely that I shall sing in public while I am here."

"But she will sing in private," said Irma, turning quickly as she caught the last words. "If you, too, will pardon the informality of the invitation and dine with us this evening, Mr. Hastings, you shall hear her."

Hastings was conscious of a thrill of gratification

which had nothing to do with the promised opportunity of hearing the new-fledged prima-donna.

"For such an inducement," said he, "I would pardon much more than the informality of an invitation which it gives me the greatest possible pleasure to accept."

XII

"SURELY a most astonishing change has come over our heiress," said Mrs. Treherne to Hastings.

It was in the drawing-room, after dinner, that this remark was made; and, since Hastings did not immediately respond, she went on:

"I have seldom been more surprised than when I heard of her having invited yourself and Mr. Norbert to dinner in such off-hand fashion. I cannot but wonder how the conjunction came about."

"Very simply," Hastings answered. "I chanced to call at the same time as Mr. Norbert; and, after having asked him to dinner for the purpose of making your acquaintance, Miss Darracote was good enough to include me in the invitation in order that I might hear Miss Vincent sing."

"Oh, that was it!" Mrs. Treherne's tone did not indicate any very lively appreciation of such an inducement. "It is to be hoped that Miss Vincent's singing will prove better than her manners," she continued with some asperity. "I do not know when I have seen a young person upon whom the stamp of Bohemia is more objectionably set. It is

a great misfortune for Irma that she has appeared. And this young painter and evident adorer — I 'm afraid his coming bodes ill for you."

Hastings looked at her with a smile.

"It is very good of you," he said, "to entertain fears on my behalf; but I do not think that Mr. Norbert's advent concerns me in any important degree."

Mrs. Treherne glanced across the room at the group which Irma, Norbert, and Camilla formed, as they sat chattering together with the gay familiarity only possible to those who have known each other long and intimately.

"In that case," she said, "if his advent does not concern you, it can only be because you have no intention of entering the lists yourself. For there is no mistaking *his* intention, and from the manner in which he is treated I should call him a formidable rival."

Hastings also glanced across the room before he replied.

"No one's opinion on such a subject could possibly be more valuable than your own," he said; "but still I venture to differ with you. I think that in Miss Darracote's treatment of Mr. Norbert there is very little to encourage an adorer. Her pleasure in his society is too frank and simple to be due to anything more than old friendship. He is closely connected with her past life; and it is that association which makes her welcome him so warmly."

"That association may also cause her to do more than welcome him warmly."

"I hardly think so, but these things are not always to be reckoned upon. They are very much matters of — fate, let us say. But there is one point on which I should like to make a suggestion. I hope that you have sufficient influence with Miss Darracote to prevent her from playing the part of hostess at his studio-tea."

Mrs. Treherne laughed.

"I confess I found the suggestion a little startling," she said. "But, after all, the proposal is only part of the old friendship to which you refer all her warmth of manner."

"Undoubtedly; but, then, we cannot expect that others will recognize and understand as much. Therefore, if it is known that Miss Darracote has made her first social appearance in honor of this unknown artist, what conclusion save one will be drawn? And as we believe this conclusion would be incorrect, it is surely the part of a friend to save her from making such a mistake."

"Mr. Norbert's studio is certainly not the place for Miss Darracote to make her *début* into society," Mrs. Treherne agreed. "If she had appeared before at any social function, the matter would be different. But she has up to this time positively declined to do so."

"And you are probably aware that there has already been some gossip brought from Paris about an artist-lover — presumably this young man."

"It is very odd how such things get about," said Mrs. Treherne, reflectively. "She never saw him after my arrival in Paris, and yet, in some mysterious manner, everybody heard a rumor of his exist-

ence. I anticipate no difficulty in persuading her to give up the plan of assisting as a hostess at his studio-tea; but her appearance there even as a guest will be certain to excite remark."

"That cannot be avoided, for she is determined to assist him by every means in her power, and we must admit that her appearance will do much to promote his success."

"She is also to sit to him for her portrait — have you heard that? Ah," — she laughed softly and a little maliciously at the expression of his face, — "I am afraid, *mon ami*, that I have reckoned a little too confidently on a disengaged fancy and an open field for you! She knows how to keep her own counsel, does Mademoiselle Irma. My opinion is that the report which came from Paris had more foundation than we imagined. It will be somewhat disappointing, but also rather amusing, if this young nobody out of Bohemia steps in, overthrows all our plans, — yours, mine, and poor Uncle Darracote's, — and walks off triumphantly with the heiress and the fortune."

It was not often, in this their later intercourse, that she had the gratification of striking a spark of emotion out of the man before her, but now she saw a sudden flash in his eyes as he replied:

"It remains to be seen whether or not we shall have that — amusement."

"Yes, it is all in the future, and quite dependent on that inscrutable thing, a woman's fancy. But" — and now she leaned toward him with an earnest air — "if I might offer a word of advice it would be that which is sometimes given on the turf: *Press*

the running. There are times when nothing else will win a race."

The change in her manner as she uttered the last words, the ring of apparent sincerity in them, surprised Hastings exceedingly; and again, as on another occasion, there came into his mind the question of what could be her motive for offering him such advice. Was it to lead him on to disappointment and refusal? Knowing Mrs. Treherne as he did, it was difficult to avoid this suspicion; and yet something in her tone and manner, as well as in the situation itself, seemed to forbid such an explanation. She, on her part, was quick to read these thoughts in his face.

"You don't trust me," she said, as she had said once before; "which is foolish as well as ungrateful. I suppose you wonder why I should feel any interest in the matter. Well, that is my affair. It is enough that I *am* anxious for you to succeed, and that I am giving you advice which if you are wise you will heed. The appearance of this artist has changed the situation more than you believe. In the first place, he is honestly in love with her. That is a great point in his favor."

"Is it not possible for other men to be also 'honestly' in love?"

"Possible — yes," she rejoined dryly; "but forgive me if I say, perhaps not very probable. Besides, other men cannot offer the proof of disinterestedness which he can. Evidently he was in love with her, and was no doubt fortunate enough to tell her so, before she became an heiress. That, also, is a point in his favor. Then you must remember that

although he has not a hundredth part of your knowledge of the world or your social accomplishments, these things appeal to Miss Darracote much less than his artistic gifts and his association with her past life."

"In short," said Hastings, with outward composure but some inward discomfort, "you think that Mr. Norbert is likely to succeed in love as well as in art?"

"Only in case you don't heed what I have said," she replied with emphasis. "You must press the running. If not —"

She paused abruptly; and Hastings, glancing around, saw that Irma was advancing across the floor toward them. The girl was smiling radiantly, and her whole aspect seemed to offer a striking and not altogether reassuring commentary on Mrs. Treherne's words.

"Will you come to the music-room?" she said, as she reached them. "Camilla is going to sing for us."

A little later the group gathered in the beautiful white-and-gold music-room drew simultaneously a deep breath, as Camilla turned from the grand piano at which she had been singing. It was an audible sign of the astonishment and delight with which they had listened to her. Then came what for the size of the audience was a storm of applause, Mrs. Treherne eagerly leading.

"Why am I not a crowned head, to give you a diamond bracelet in token of appreciation!" she cried. "But it will come — royal appreciation, diamond bracelets, and all. My dear, your voice is

superb! I had no conception of hearing anything so fine."

"Nor I," said Hastings, turning to Irma. "There are not half a dozen singers in the world to-day with such a voice as Miss Vincent possesses."

"It is magnificent, is it not?" said Irma. "I knew that you would be surprised and charmed. Every one is who hears her. It is no wonder that her success was so immediate and so brilliant when she appeared in public."

"No wonder at all. Success in her case was a foregone conclusion."

"Especially to herself," Irma went on. "She never had a doubt of it. And she has no doubt of everything coming to her now, — reputation, fortune, all that great singers gain."

"All will come. With those magic notes of hers she can bring the world to her feet."

"And I am such a selfish wretch that I am almost sorry for it. I am sure you are surprised," — Hastings indeed looked so, — "but it is true. I have been so foolish as to fancy that when Camilla came I could persuade her to give up her professional career and share my life and all this fortune which has come to me. It was a pleasant dream. I imagined how we would live together, travel, see everything that we used to talk of in the days of our poverty, go everywhere that we liked. I suppose the dream was too pleasant to become a reality," she broke off with a sigh. "At all events, it is certain that it will never be realized; for Camilla prefers her professional life. And it is, no doubt, natural that she should."

"Very natural, since the prospects, or, rather, the certainties in it are so brilliant," said Hastings, inwardly commending Camilla's choice. "You have very much to offer her; but, after all, not so much as her art. For you must remember that besides the material rewards, which will come to her abundantly, a popular singer tastes success in its most intoxicating forms of homage, adulation, flattery."

"So she says, and that is why she begs me not to ask her to give up such a life. Of course I shall not ask her again, but if I did it would be useless. Nothing would induce her to give it up. I am sure of that now."

"Let us acknowledge that she would be made of very extraordinary material if she were willing to do so," said Hastings. "With those wonderful tones of hers still ringing in my ears, I cannot see how it would be possible to ask such a sacrifice of her."

"I never thought of it as a sacrifice," said Irma, "or I should not have asked it. I fancied that she might find as much happiness in our life together as I should. But I recognize my mistake. She has no need of me nor of anything which I can give her. The world is before her and she is eager to conquer it."

"Most of us are eager to follow the life which will bring us, we think, most happiness and success," said Hastings. "But it would not do for you to tempt many people with the offer you made to Miss Vincent."

"There is no one else whom I could wish to tempt," she said; "and certainly no one who would give up anything for me."

The absolute simplicity of these words seemed for a moment to render it impossible for him to reply to them. Then he leaned forward. There was no pretence in his tone.

"There is at least one person," he said, "who would give up anything for you."

She started. "I have no desire," she said, "that any one should give up anything for me. It was very far from my intention to imply such a desire."

"I am confident of that," he answered. "I only wished you to believe that, if the occasion arose, there is one person who would not hesitate at any sacrifice for you; or, to put the matter more correctly, who would not feel anything a sacrifice which could add to your happiness."

Something in his tone compelled recognition of his sincerity, and there was a sudden softness of grateful emotion in the glance which now met his.

"I am not in the habit of asking my friends to contribute to my happiness by sacrifices," she said. "But I do believe — and thank you. Now let us see if Camilla will not give us Mignon's song."

It was with that subtle intoxication of the senses which music, above all things, is able to produce that Hastings looked up at the brilliant, starlit sky when, an hour later, he found himself on the doorstep of Argyle, and was pleasantly conscious of the crisp coolness of the outer air upon his face. He turned to Norbert, who stood beside him.

"What a glorious night for exercise!" he said. "One might enjoy a tramp of five miles in this

atmosphere. I suppose you are walking into the city — or at least to the electric cars?"

"Yes," Norbert replied somewhat stiffly. "I came out in that manner."

"And I intend to spend the night at my cottage near here, but, if you have no objection, I 'll walk with you to the railway. Will you have a cigar? These are not bad."

Cigars having been lighted and coats buttoned across their chests, the two set off at a brisk pace around the sweeping drive to the gates. Again Hastings was the first to speak.

"What an astonishing voice Miss Vincent has!" he said. "I was never more surprised than by its quality and cultivation. I feel myself thrilling yet under the influence of it, and I am not an impressionable subject."

"It is remarkably fine," Norbert assented. "And her success has been very great."

"With such a voice how could she fail to succeed? A good actress, too, no doubt?"

"Admirable. If her voice ever fails, she can make a career for herself as an actress. I have heard that said again and again by those who know."

"She is an artist to the ends of her fingers," said Hastings, with a laugh. "There is no mistaking that. Nor any doubt that she will use her opportunities to the utmost for fame and fortune. What a different type from Miss Darracote! Odd that they should be cousins."

"And yet of both it may be said with truth, that they are, by nature at least, artists to the ends of

their fingers," answered Norbert, in the tone of one who, if he has not already taken offence, is fully prepared to do so. "It is not possible to judge Miss Darracote very accurately in her present environment. It does not suit her in the least. She is a changed being — cramped and constrained, like a bird in a cage, which has forgotten how to sing."

"And you think that the bird should be restored to its native air, in order that it may sing again?" Hastings asked. "But what is that native air — Bohemia?"

"If you like to call it so," the other returned — and now the offence was very perceptible in his tone. "It is certainly the artistic atmosphere in which she was an altogether different creature from what she is now. To one who knew her there the change is most pathetic. And how could it be otherwise? What has Gilbert Darracote's daughter to do with all of *this?*"

His eyes swept with a glance of indignant scorn over the ordered stateliness of the wide grounds lying around them, clearly to be seen in the bright starlight. It was evident that he would have liked to scorch and wither these visible signs of all that divided Irma from her old life.

"Does it not occur to you that some other things beside her environment may have changed Miss Darracote?" Hastings suggested. "She has suffered grief, she has been in mourning and consequent seclusion. Those conditions do not tend to produce gayety, if that is what you miss."

"That is not all I miss," Norbert replied. "The change is deeper than any mere loss of gayety. It

is as I said before, — she is cramped and constrained in all her faculties. The former atmosphere of her life was artistic and intellectual in the extreme. What is it now? Is n't it embodied in that woman — that Mrs. Treherne — who is a perfect type of the arrogant and stupid Philistinism of money and so-called fashion?"

"Poor Mrs. Treherne!" said Hastings, in a tone of genuine amusement. "I really don't think she deserves to be quite so severely characterized. We are all Philistines, no doubt, when compared with the types to be found in the atmosphere of which you speak, but our influence has hardly been so great as to cramp and constrain Miss Darracote. There is no doubt, however," he added more seriously, "that the world in which she finds herself now is very different from the world she left. But, after all, don't we, to a certain degree, make our own atmosphere? I think you will find that in time Miss Darracote will make hers. From my knowledge of her I should say that she is less likely than many artists whom I have known to have her standards lowered by the influence of money and 'so-called fashion.'"

Norbert felt himself flush. It was impossible to resent the sarcasm of those quiet words, without thereby acknowledging a personal application of them, but, none the less, he felt them keenly; and it was a minute before he could speak with the calmness he knew to be desirable. They had left the grounds of Argyle, and were tramping, side by side, along the broad white avenue which stretched between shadowy copses and open, swelling lawns,

toward the spot where the reflection of the city's lights put out the star-shine, when he finally said:

"There is n't the least doubt that artists, like other people, are subject to the temptation of having their standards lowered by those influences, and that numbers of them yield to the temptation. But we were not speaking of individuals but of an atmosphere. Of course, to a certain extent, any one as rich as Miss Darracote can make her own atmosphere, but only to a certain extent. There is n't much place for millionaires in what you call Bohemia. They can only enter there as outsiders, amateurs, people who play at art and patronize artists, and that is a rôle which would hardly suit her father's daughter."

"In other words," said Hastings, "you are agreed with the world you profess to despise in rating the outward accidents of life — and what is wealth but an outward accident? — above the realities of character and temperament. I don't really see that the most abject worshipper of the golden calf could do more."

"I don't rate the outward accidents of life above the realities," the young man answered hotly; "but I distinctly recognize that they *are* so rated, and I prefer to accept conditions as I find them rather than to make a vain fight against them. I may despise the worship of the golden calf, but I should be blind if I did n't see that the whole world is engaged in that worship."

"With the exception of a small portion of Bohemia," said Hastings, in the same tone of exasperating quietness. "But in the select number of those

who never bent the knee to Mammon I have always understood that Miss Darracote's father was included, yet it seems that you would exclude his daughter from what you call her native atmosphere because she has inherited, by no fault of her own, a large amount of money. Is that very liberal or very just?"

"It would be neither, if I had ever meant to imply such a thing," Norbert returned. "But, so far from that, I only intended to express my sense — which has the advantage of being based on knowledge — of the wide difference which divides the world Miss Darracote has left from that in which circumstances have placed her. And no one is stronger than circumstances, no one can resist the effect of environment. It tells in one way or another. It must tell, in time, even on *her.*" He was silent for a moment, and then added coldly: "Don't misunderstand me again. I don't for a moment imagine that it can ever change herself, her real self, but it can make a great barrier between her past and her present, over which it will be difficult for her to step. But I do not really care to discuss or analyze Miss Darracote further. I appreciate her too highly, I admire her too much —"

Despite himself, and his earnest desire to be cool and quiet, his voice trembled, broke. How could he speak, even in the most guarded terms, of what she was to him, and not betray the secret of his heart to this cynical, scoffing man of the world, as he called Hastings in his thoughts? So he stopped — not knowing that betrayal was impossible, because the man of the world, who felt no inclination

to be either cynical or scoffing, recognized the secret as clearly as himself; and understood also the meaning of that abrupt pause, the reluctance to utter what lay deepest and nearest the sources of all reverence, all admiration.

"I don't think that our discussion of Miss Darracote has been at all disrespectful," Hastings said. "Indeed, I must assure you, that however Philistine the friends whom she has made in her new life may be, they do not yield to those of the old in appreciation and admiration of her character. But we will change the subject. — Did I understand that you have taken a studio in the new Alston building? The studios there are, I believe, admirably constructed, with a special view to artist's requirements."

On this safe ground the conversation was maintained until they reached the electric railway. After seeing Norbert on a car, Hastings turned and walked back toward his cottage. As he swung along, at a pace which proved his good physical condition, he said to himself that if his intentions towards Irma had needed any touch and spur of rivalry, that touch and spur had come. Transparent, absurdly transparent, even to the most superficial observation, was the feeling of the man from whom he had parted, but he knew that it was not to be despised on that ground. It had the strength of all simple and direct things, besides a certain touch of young romance, due in this case, however, not so much to youth as to temperament. And that temperament — the temperament of the artist — was it not possible that it might have an attraction for the girl who had

been born and brought up in the midst of things artistic, which he, Hastings, might underrate? He acknowledged to himself that it was possible, and yet he had no sense of fear for his own success. This, no doubt, was partly due to the self-confidence born of a life which had never known a serious defeat, especially in its relations with women; but it was more particularly and immediately due to the remembrance of the eyes which had so lately looked into his, and of the voice which had said, "I do believe — and thank you."

No, he would not suffer himself to be hurried, he would not "press the running." He would wait his own time, use his own judgment, enjoy to the utmost the charm of the present, a more delicate, elusive charm than he had ever known before. All the mental epicurean in him rose in protest at the thought of ending it. If life had taught him anything, it was the value, and the astonishing rarity, of such feelings as he recognized in himself, and, as he walked on in the night, with his pulses thrilling as they had not thrilled since he was twenty years old, he determined that nothing should induce him to hasten by an hour the end of anything so exquisite.

XIII

NORBERT'S studio-tea was a decided success, notwithstanding that Irma, yielding to Mrs. Treherne's representations, did not assist at it in a hostess-like capacity. The mere fact of her presence, however, was sufficient to attract attention to

the young artist, as Hastings had prophesied that it would; and even more effective to that end were a few words which she spoke in his behalf to her friends, Mrs. Lawton and Mrs. Royal Smith.

"An old friend of your father's and your own?" said the latter. "Of course I will do all in my power to assist him. Tell him to send me a card for his exhibition, or whatever he calls it, and then I shall be prepared to talk of his pictures intelligently."

Now, every one who knew Mrs. Royal Smith knew also that she was not only always "as good as her word," but generally even better; so it was not surprising that her appearance in Norbert's studio was followed by a very enthusiastic patronage of himself and his art. The undoubted cleverness of his work at once appealed to her, and before leaving she gave him an order for a portrait of herself.

"It is really a matter of curiosity with me," she assured him. "I want to see myself through your eyes, for they seem to be very shrewd eyes indeed. The manner in which you have caught and brought out the dominant characteristics of these people" — indicating some of the portraits he had painted in Paris — "is most remarkable. Do you think you can do as much with me?"

"I ought to be able to do more," answered the young man, regarding her with that intent artist gaze which sees so much and so deeply. "You are a better subject than any of those. A painter cannot bring out character in a portrait unless there is character to be brought out, you know; and the more character, the better chance to do good work."

"Well, see what you can make of me," said she, laughing. "I promise you that if you succeed — and you need not be afraid of being truthful — it will become the fashion to be painted by you. There is nothing so popular just now as anything that savors of self-analysis and self-revelation, and everybody will be eager to see his or her character revealed through the medium of such art as yours. Only forgive me if I make one suggestion — put your prices high enough. This delightful world of ours takes a man's work at his own valuation of it, and modest merit is altogether at a discount."

"You are more than kind," replied Norbert, who was exceedingly surprised. "I shall bear your advice in mind; although it strikes me that there would be something of presumption in my venturing to ask prices such as are paid for the work of famous artists."

"It is the way to become famous yourself," she said. "*L'audace, l'audace, toujours l'audace!* Believe me that is a good motto to adopt in beginning life. Half the reputations in the world are made by following it."

Involuntarily Norbert's glance turned toward Irma, who was standing with Mrs. Lawton on the other side of the room.

"I believe you knew Mr. Darracote," he said. "I am thinking how much he scorned any success which came to an artist other than by the honest doing of good work."

"Yes," Mrs. Royal Smith assented. "I knew Mr. Darracote, and his ideals and theories, very well. They were fine and high, — nobody appre-

ciated that better than I. But in consequence of them he lived and died a poor and comparatively unknown man. Would it suit you to live and die in such fashion?"

"I confess that it would not," he answered, more and more surprised by this little white-haired lady with the keen face and incisive speech. "I have as much more ambition as I have less unworldliness than he possessed."

Mrs. Royal Smith gave a nod of approval.

"So much the better," she said. "Probably you will consider me a sadly worldly old woman, but I think that it is a misfortune to have too much unworldliness. We are agreed that it was a misfortune for Mr. Darracote; and here is this lovely creature, his daughter," — she watched her auditor closely now, — "who, I fear, will commit some mistake, with lifelong consequences perhaps, from the same characteristic."

Norbert looked as startled as he felt.

"I know that Miss Darracote, like her father, is unworldly in the extreme; but what particular mistake do you fear for her?" he asked.

"Many kinds of mistakes are possible," said Mrs. Royal Smith, evasively. Then she put up her eyeglasses, and made a remark concerning the picture before which they were standing.

As a matter of fact, she felt pretty sure of what she wished to know. It was obvious that Norbert was in love with Irma, and it was characteristic of Mrs. Royal Smith that she decided then and there that she would throw the weight of her influence in his favor. For, instead of being what she called

herself, a sadly worldly woman, she was at bottom very unworldly, notwithstanding her knowledge of the world and her social leadership. She had from the first conceived a disapproval of Hastings as a suitor of the young heiress; and it seemed to her now that Norbert had opportunely appeared to prevent anything so certain to end unhappily as a marriage between the daughter and pupil of an idealist and a man of the world noted even among men of the world for his disillusionized attitude toward life. How much more appropriate, as well as more romantic, it would be if the girl should marry an artist like her father, one who had no doubt loved her before any golden halo was cast around her, rather than take the great risk of uniting her life with one who was attracted by her wealth alone! All this passed rapidly through Mrs. Royal Smith's mind as she stood talking of the pictures; and the decided manner in which she settled Irma's future only afforded another proof of the manner in which many of us fancy ourselves able to play Providence for our friends.

On the other side of the studio Mrs. Lawton was meanwhile saying to Irma:

"It is no wonder I thought this picture" — a charmingly painted head before which they were standing — "resembled you strikingly. You remember I spoke of it to you before I knew that you were acquainted with the artist. One sees now that it is neither more nor less than a portrait."

"It is only a study of my head drawn from memory," Irma replied. "I never sat for it."

Mrs. Lawton looked surprised.

"If you never sat for it," she said, "the painter

must carry your face with wonderful fidelity in his memory — or in his heart."

Under the significance of the last words, Irma colored and gave the speaker a reproachful glance.

"Do you not know," she said, "that an artist sees — and remembers — things to which other people are blind? And in my old life Mr. Norbert had many opportunities of seeing me; for he was one of our circle of particular friends."

"Oh, I know very well of what an artist is capable!" said Mrs. Lawton, smiling. "And I also know that in other respects he is very like other men. But if this were painted without a sitting, one wonders a little what he could do *with* one."

"You will probably see before very long, for I have given him a commission to paint my portrait; although I really do not know what I am to do with it after it is painted. But the object to be accomplished is, first, that he may show what he can do; and, secondly, to give him the benefit of the order. Would you not like yours painted also? You are a very artistic subject."

Mrs. Lawton shook her head a little sadly.

"No," she answered. "What you have said of yourself is doubly true of me — I should not know what to do with it. There are already many pictures of me in existence and there is no one to value them — I mean in any special sense. One does not care to have one's portrait painted for one's self."

"You must have many friends and relatives who would value it," said Irma. "Your case is not like mine, for I have really and truly no one."

"But you will have some one — every one, in fact,

who is needed to make your life full and happy," replied the elder woman. "Our cases are indeed totally different; for your life is all before you, and mine is all behind. Only" — she passed her hand through the girl's arm and pressed it gently — "you must not make an error at the beginning. You must not mistake anything else — not the tenderness of old friendship nor any glamour of new fancy — for the divine thing called love. Forgive me for venturing to say this. But I am sure that with you especially such a mistake would be fatal. And now" — she changed her tone quickly — "let us look at some of the other portraits. It is all wonderfully clever work, and perhaps for your sake I may change my mind about giving Mr. Norbert an order. But I would prefer that it were for a portrait of some one else rather than of myself."

"I have given him an order for a portrait of Camilla as well as of myself," said Irma. "I think she will make an effective subject."

"Admirable," answered Mrs. Lawton, glancing at Camilla, who was seated at a little distance in a high-backed chair covered with some Oriental stuff of dusky blue and gold which threw into relief the fairness of her beauty, enhanced as it was by the most picturesque attire. By her side sat Rapier on a low seat, teacup in hand, and his ugly, clever face full of animated interest as they talked.

"Your cousin is very handsome," Mrs. Lawton went on, after a brief pause. "But how soon a stage life sets its stamp on a woman! She may not at this moment be thinking of effect, but how perfectly she is posed for it all the same!"

"Yes," Irma agreed, rather reluctantly. "I find a great change in Camilla, — greater than I would have imagined so short a time could work. And in a certain sense I have lost her. I thought we might have been much to each other, for we are both alone in the world; but she is intoxicated by success and homage, and absorbed in her career. It is natural, no doubt; but to me it is a great disappointment."

Again Mrs. Lawton pressed the arm she held.

"Life is made up of disappointments," she said. "Our only wisdom is in learning to bear them with philosophy. Above all, there are so few people in the world who can be trusted not to disappoint us. — Ah, yonder comes Gerard Hastings! Now, it would surprise many people to hear me say so, but I really think that he is one of the most trustworthy persons I know. He makes few professions and has no high pretensions of any kind, but within the limit of what he does profess he is to be trusted to the last extremity."

So it came to pass that, in a certain sense, these two friends of Irma's arrayed themselves as partisans on opposite sides. It was only to be expected, however, that the majority of those who came to see the work of the new artist, and who found the young heiress very much in evidence and radiant with interest and pleasure in his success, should have leaped to a conclusion similar to that of Mrs. Royal Smith. Evidently here was the artist lover regarding whom there had been many rumors; and people were to be excused for saying to each other that it looked very much as if Gerard Hastings might, after

all, have to content himself with only that share of the Darracote fortune which he had received under the will of the late Mr. Darracote.

It added very much to the general interest of the situation when Hastings himself appeared; and the keenest observation failed to detect any cloud of possible or prospective failure about him. He was full of the most cordial praise and patronage of the artist's work, but there was nothing in this patronage which the most sensitive-minded of artists could have resented. Indeed, like Mrs. Royal Smith, he seemed determined that his interest should take a practical form. He, too, ordered a portrait of himself, which was also to include that of two favorite dogs; and when Norbert hesitated to accept the commission, saying that he already had his hands full of work, Hastings bade him take his time about executing it.

"I am in no haste," he said. "But for your own sake I may suggest a pleasant way of doing it. Whenever you want a little change from your studio here, and the sitters and visitors who will soon throng about you, come out to my country-place — it adjoins Argyle. I can furnish you a room with a capital light, and you can make studies of the dogs and myself at your leisure, — especially of the dogs, for I am more anxious about their portraits than my own."

In this speech the words, "it adjoins Argyle," arrested Norbert's attention, and prevented the refusal which trembled on his lips. To be near Argyle was not only an inducement, but a sudden desire seized him to watch this man at close quarters

and learn what he really had to fear from him. The matter ended, therefore, in his accepting the commission and promising to go out to the cottage to make his studies for the portrait. If Hastings, on his side, needed a reward, Irma's smile when she heard of the arrangement was sufficient.

"How very good of you!" she said. "Why, with orders from yourself and Mrs. Royal Smith and perhaps Mrs. Lawton, he will float into success at once. And I should not wish you to give him the order if I were not sure that he is really a very clever artist."

"His work speaks for him," replied Hastings. "One sees his ability at a glance. Indeed it is such marked ability that he needs no patronage to insure his success. Only, a few orders will of course smooth his way at the first. And I fancy it will be pleasant for him to come out to Idlesse, where I shall be a good deal, now that the spring is opening."

"That will be delightful," said Irma, frankly; "for then you can both come over to Argyle; and, with Camilla there, it will seem like a bit of the dear old life renewed."

"But since I had no part in that life," said Hastings, "I will perhaps be out of place in such a meeting of old friends."

If it was not altogether hypocritical, this speech, the speaker should have been reassured by the look in the eyes that met his own.

"Does it matter whether friends are old or new if they *are* friends?" Irma asked.

The next afternoon there was again a social gathering at Argyle, for Irma had asked those who had

any claim to be called her friends to come and hear Camilla sing. That it was an artistic triumph for the latter need scarcely be said. All save a few, who had heard of the young singer's brilliant *début* abroad, found themselves more than astonished, and Rapier was quite justified in begging Miss Darracote if she had any more geniuses to introduce to exercise a little prudence in presenting them, or society would be altogether stupefied by such new and extraordinary brilliancy.

"You see we aren't accustomed to it," he explained. "Our lions are mostly of the tamest description, and we make their roaring, such as it is, go a long way. We are not fond of too much cleverness. There is probably an effect of contrast in it that we disapprove. But here you have the temerity to present to us a prima-donna from grand opera, immediately after an artist who puts our characters, rather than our faces, on his canvas."

"But you are really giving me too much credit — or is it too much blame?" Irma laughed in reply. "I am not responsible for Mr. Norbert, however much I may be for Camilla. He brought himself and his pictures here without consulting me."

"All the same, I think we must hold you responsible for Mr. Norbert, as well as for Miss Vincent. I fancy that we should not have his pictures and himself among us if he had not known that he possessed at least one friend here."

"That he certainly knew. I should be very sorry if he had for an instant doubted it. But in Bohemia we know our friends, and we never doubt them."

"Happy Bohemia! — happy people who dwell

there! I am tempted to leave the green pastures of society and take my way thither. There is only one drawback — *you* have left it. And then if it is sending such recruits to us as Miss Vincent and Mr. Norbert, it will not become necessary to forsake society in order to find cleverness."

"How flattering you are to the friends who treat you with such distinguished consideration, and cry, 'How delightfully clever Mr. Rapier is! — what lovely things he writes!'" said Irma, with gentle mockery. "You forget, too, that while clever men may be the exception and not the rule in what is called society, they are the rule and not the exception in Bohemia."

"I understand what you kindly imply. The cleverness which suffices for a social reputation looms very small in Bohemia. I am not altogether unacquainted with that fact. I, too, have occasionally wandered there. But tell me — is it possible that the stout man yonder in a Roman collar is really Albert Thorne, the critic and essayist, who went under so completely years ago when he joined the Catholic Church?"

Irma looked a little puzzled.

"I think," she said, "that you will have to ask himself that question. You see I am very new to things and reputations in this country. He is Father Thorne, a priest and one who writes admirably — I know so much, for I have read some of his articles — but it is all I do know. If you like I will introduce you to him; he will tell you whether or not he is the person of whom you speak."

"I shall be immensely obliged," Rapier replied,

"for there is a volume of his essays that is a *vade mecum* of mine. And really, if this is *the* Albert Thorne, you will deserve a premium for unearthing old geniuses, as well as presenting new ones."

"Let us then settle the point at once."

Father Thorne, who was talking to Camilla, turned as they approached.

"I can hardly express my sense of the great pleasure you have given us, in allowing us to hear Miss Vincent sing," he said to Irma. "I have not heard such a voice for more than twenty years."

"He knows absolutely everything about singing," said Camilla, in a half-awed tone. "I could have fancied it was the *maestro* talking."

"Oh, I was once a passionate musical enthusiast," said the priest, with a smile. "There was a time when I fancied that a false harmony would have distracted me. But one gets bravely over such things. I listen now with great equanimity to the singing of my choir every Sunday."

"Camilla shall sing for you next Sunday," said Irma, smiling. "And now let me present Mr. Rapier, who is very anxious to find some one — he will tell us whom — under the soutane of Father Thorne."

"Only the author of 'Some Problems of Life,'" said Rapier, "if I may be permitted to seek for him."

"I should be very glad if I could say that you would not find him," replied Father Thorne. "We have all no doubt some things in our lives to repent, but it does not happen to all of us to put those things into the form of literature, which has a

curious power of survival when one least desires that it shall survive. I should like to know that 'Some Problems of Life' had dropped into the limbo of forgotten things."

"But why?" asked Irma.

"I think I can guess why," said Rapier. "Many of the themes are treated in a very pessimistic spirit, of which Father Thorne now possibly disapproves. But being much of a pessimist myself, I find that this adds to their fascination."

"If instead of describing yourself as 'much of a pessimist,' Rapier, you described yourself as a professional pessimist, it strikes me that it would be more accurate," said Hastings, who now joined the group. "Pessimism has become one of the tricks of the trade of you modern literateurs, and, thanks to your persistent efforts, everything that one reads is so steeped in gloom that one has to leave literature and go to life itself to find a little cheerfulness."

"They certainly don't appear to be weighed down with gloom themselves, these people who write and paint such frightfully depressing things!" cried Camilla. "Mr. Rapier, for example, looks as if he found life sufficiently cheerful, although I dare say he writes of it as if it were an unmitigated evil."

Mr. Rapier, with an air of modest merit, owned that this was very much his view of existence, when he put pen to paper. When it was a question of merely living, however, there were perhaps some mitigations to be found — as, for example, Miss Vincent's singing.

"But the writer," he added, "does not speak of

himself and his own small experience when he writes of life. He looks around him, and seeing the futility, the hopelessness, the sadness of all things, he puts on record what he finds."

"If he only puts on record what he finds, he is not a pessimist," said Father Thorne. "To paint things *as they are* is not pessimism. Pessimism is to see a soul of evil at the heart of existence, to acknowledge no benefit in suffering, hardship, or sacrifice. But if we recognize, instead of evil, a soul of good, what are these things but opportunities to learn such lessons as prosperity and exemption from pain can never teach?"

It was a strange, earnest note, breaking in on the light chatter, and it recalled to Irma the scene in the garden of Passy, when their friends had gathered to bid them good-bye, and when, before he went so unexpectedly upon his last, long journey, Gilbert Darracote had spoken of the player who "learned by his losses." Were they not all players in the great game of life, and by what deep, heart-searching losses were they yet to learn the task set for them?

The thought made her turn away. She had no longer interest for the discussion into which Rapier eagerly plunged, and when she found Norbert by her side, the memory of the past with which he was so closely linked — his association with that last picture of her father, the recollection of the part he had borne by sympathy in her great sorrow — gave to her manner, her voice, her eyes a kindness absolutely affectionate.

"Do you remember," she was saying to him as they crossed the room, "how the Abbé Ravoux spoke

that last evening — and what my father said? Father Thorne's words were like an echo of it. Ah, if we could only remember always that there is 'a soul of good' even at the heart of things evil, life would be very different. It is a talisman which changes everything."

"But you need no talisman to change your life," Norbert answered. "You possess everything that the world values — "

"The world, yes — and is there no danger that I, too, may grow to value excessively these things the world rates so high?" she asked. "But I don't possess everything. I lack the thing of all others which is of most value in life, and I can't but wonder a little what soul of good there is at the heart of loneliness."

"But you need not be lonely," Norbert began, and then stopped abruptly. This was surely no time nor place to utter all that burned within him for utterance, however much her kindness, her confidence, might tempt him to do so. There was hope, however — not only then, but later, he told himself, there was distinctly hope, in these words of hers. For since she owned that she was lonely, was it not as much as to say that nothing in her new life, neither new splendors, nor new friends, nor those who plainly aspired to be more than friends, had been able to fill the heart which still longed for the things and the friends of her old life?

Meanwhile, there were many eyes bent upon the young heiress as she crossed the room talking in such intimate fashion with the artist, whose name every one in her circle, and out of it for that matter,

was connecting with her own. Mrs. Treherne's eyes had a shade of uneasiness in them as they followed the two figures. This conjunction was very far from what *she* wished to see. She glanced at Hastings irritably. Why did he not follow her advice and "press the running"? His self-confidence, his vanity, might for once lead him to failure if he underrated — and it seemed that he did underrate — the strength of the forces of old association, and tastes in common, of idealism, of Heaven only knew what absurdity, which were arrayed against him. She turned to Mrs. Royal Smith, and was surprised to meet a curious look of satisfaction.

"It is pleasant to see how much Miss Darracote enjoys the society of her old friends," that lady said. "She has bloomed into new life under their influence. And really the advent of these two clever young people makes one understand what a different world it was in which she formerly lived, and how very stupid we must all seem to her."

Mrs. Treherne's lip curled.

"I don't find myself 'under conviction' of stupidity because a painter and a singer from Bohemia have been suddenly brought into our midst," she said. "Of course one knows that such people exist, yet what is their cleverness, after all, but a trade, like any other? I consider it a great misfortune for Irma that they are here — especially the man. One sees at a glance what his hopes are, and there is no telling what folly she may commit. A girl brought up in our world would be very different — "

"Very," Mrs. Royal Smith assented somewhat dryly.

"One would know what to reckon on with her," Mrs. Treherne continued, "and she would have some idea of the relative value of things, of what is and what is not possible. But this girl has none, and some day she may startle us by doing the impossible."

"She will not startle me," said Mrs. Royal Smith, quietly. "The best thing that I can hope for her is that she will have courage to make and live her own life, without regard to what is expected of her because she has inherited a great deal of money. If she marries this young artist — for we may as well speak frankly — I shall be glad. She will be saved from — well, from obvious dangers, and all that was best in her own life, the artistic atmosphere and all the rest of it, will be restored to her, while she will still retain the advantages of the new. Such a marriage, it seems to me, would be absolutely ideal."

"You amaze me!" said Mrs. Treherne, very sincerely. "I had no idea that you were so romantic."

"I suppose not," the other replied. "My romantic tendencies have not very much play in the world where we live. But Irma Darracote belongs to quite another world. It is well to remember that."

Some one else was remembering it at this moment. Mrs. Lawton, also, had watched the girl moving across the floor, and had then looked at Hastings, who stood beside her.

"'I, too, shepherds in Arcadia dwelt,'" she murmured. "I fancy Mr. Norbert is counting very much on the fact that he dwelt in Arcadia with our Pscyhe before she became an heiress. But I think he will find that she is not altogether Arcadian.

Unless I am much mistaken, she will not be moved by any glamour of old association to turn away from a rare opportunity for a wide life and give herself to a narrow one."

Hastings could not restrain a smile.

"Mr. Norbert," he said, "would think that he, and all which he stands for, represents the wide life and *we*, and all that surrounds us, the narrow one."

"Mr. Norbert," she replied in a tone of delicate but not unkind scorn, "is too young to know, and I doubt if he will ever learn, that there can be as much narrowness in the pursuit of art as in — let us say, the buying of sugar. It is not the same kind of narrowness, but it is narrowness all the same. For him nothing exists except the world of art, but we know that a very wide world, full of varied interests, lies outside of art — or if not of art, at least of the world in which painters live and talk 'shop' about their pictures. Fate has shown unusual discernment in placing Irma in this wider world, and I am confident she will not prove unworthy of her destiny, as Mr. Rapier would say."

"I entirely agree with you," said Hastings, "and I only wonder where you have gained so much wisdom."

"When one is merely a looker-on in life, one must be very dull if one does not perceive and learn a great deal which escapes the notice of those who are absorbed in their personal affairs," she answered. "And nothing, I think, strikes one more than the shallowness of many judgments. There is so much that is complex both in life and in character — "

She paused, her glance still following Irma, who

seated herself on a sofa at the other side of the room and swept aside her skirts to make room for Norbert beside her.

"Now, that has the appearance of a pretty romance, and might deceive — no doubt is deceiving many people," Mrs. Lawton went on meditatively. "Yet I am perfectly sure that it is n't what it looks, and I am equally sure that it would be a great mistake if it were. That sounds very obscure, but perhaps you understand me?"

Again Hastings smiled.

"I understand perfectly," he said, "and can only repeat that I fully agree with you. Miss Darracote is certainly made for something wider and better than an *atelier* in Bohemia — or out of it."

XIV

IT was natural that after this there was a great change in Irma's life. The almost cloistral quiet in which she had lived since her arrival in America became impossible after Camilla's gay presence entered Argyle. It was not only that the latter brought with her a wholesome breath of the outer world, but Irma felt that to ask or expect her to share the seclusion in which she had herself contentedly existed was impossible. So for Camilla's sake the doors of Argyle were once more opened in a social sense, and although the social occasions which followed were limited and quiet enough, it seemed to Irma as if she were launched upon a life full of engagements and excitements.

As was to be expected, the youth in her revived under these circumstances, the power of enjoyment, and the gayety which had always been one of her distinguishing characteristics. Society became enthusiastic over the charm of the young mistress of Argyle, but Camilla and Norbert simply recognized the girl whose blithesomeness had brightened the old house in Passy, where Gilbert Darracote had worked and philosophized and received his friends. It was no stranger, but the Irma of those old days, whom they found absolutely unchanged and untouched by the great change in her worldly position.

To Norbert, as to Camilla, this was a lasting astonishment; for there is no surer proof of the importance assigned to the possession of wealth, even by those who fancy they do not overvalue it, than the surprise that these people feel when they find one whom it has no power to change. Norbert, with all the scorn of an artist and an idealist, would have repudiated for himself any love of money, and yet he was amazed that her inheritance had failed to affect Irma in the least.

That it affected himself very much in one way was perhaps natural. The poor man who loves a rich woman must, if he is honestly disinterested, be acutely conscious of the barrier which her riches erect, and the suspicions they inevitably bring upon himself. Moreover, there are degrees in heiress-ship; and when Norbert put aside his more serious ambitions and seized the opportunity to win a facile and lucrative reputation by painting portraits, there is no doubt that his motive was to render himself an eligible suitor for the girl whom chance had

suddenly placed, by the potency of money, so far above him. It was therefore a disappointment when he found that her fortune was much greater than he had fancied, — so great, indeed, that the most successful of artists could never hope to achieve by his art financial equality with her.

It is possible that when this fact was fully brought to his apprehension he might have abandoned all thought of renewing his suit had not his ardor been stimulated by the most powerful of all means, — the presence of a rival in the field, and that rival one whom he felt sure it could not be for Irma's happiness to marry. Nor was any extended acquaintance necessary for him to reach this decision. The antagonism which in the first moment that his eye fell upon Hastings sprang up in his mind was not lessened by anything in their after-intercourse. So far from that, it might have been said to deepen constantly, and with it his belief that Hastings had no other than a mercenary motive in the pretensions which his jealous eye quickly and clearly divined. The renewal of his own suit began under these circumstances to assume almost the aspect of a duty, for was it not a duty to save Irma, if she possibly could be saved, from becoming the victim of one who sought her only for her fortune? It was characteristic of Norbert that he had not the least doubt on the last point, that he did not entertain for a moment the possibility of any sincerity of motive on the part of one who belonged to a class which he disliked and despised.

In this view, and also in his own pretensions, he received enthusiastic support from Camilla. The

latter had seized the situation immediately, and also immediately arrayed herself on the side of Norbert. This was not only because of her kindly feeling toward one who belonged, she said to herself, to her own world, but was also due to the fact that a marriage with him would keep Irma united to her old life and her old friends, whereas if she married Hastings it was certain that she would be in great measure lost to both. Now, apart from any question of affection, Camilla did not wish to lose hold of one able to do so much for her friends. Just now all was fair sailing with the *impresarios* and with the public; but there was always a chance that this might not last. Indeed, many accidents were possible; and in case of such accidents how good to have a friend like Irma in the background! In all this calculation she gave but a passing thought to the consideration of what was for Irma's own happiness; although she was not herself aware of the fact, and would have indignantly repudiated such a charge had it been made.

"I don't understand your procrastination," she said impatiently to Norbert one day, as they walked together in the garden. "If I were a man and loved a woman, I should waste no time in sighing, but I would go and tell her so. *Ma foi*, why not? And what are you waiting for, anyway? I am sure you have known Irma long enough and well enough for — for anything!"

Norbert looked at the speaker with the shade of resentment with which he was rather accustomed to receive these peremptory admonitions and counsels.

"I am very grateful for your interest," he said,

"but does n't it occur to you that there are some things of which one can judge for oneself better than anybody else can judge for one?"

"No, it does n't occur to me at all," she replied, "and I don't believe that it is true — nor that you are grateful for my interest, either. You should be, but people are generally anything except what they should be. If I were not thinking of Irma, rather than of you, I should transfer my interest to Mr. Hastings. He would at least be polite when I offered him advice."

"Oh, yes, he would certainly be polite," Norbert agreed sarcastically. "But he would also certainly intimate to you that he felt quite capable of managing his own affairs. If you are looking for gratitude, I would n't advise you to transfer your interest to him. Now I *am* grateful, though I may not always seem so, and if I don't follow your advice it is only because I am a coward. Don't you see how it is? I have so much to lose if — if things go wrong."

"I don't see it at all. If things go wrong — that is, if Irma says she is extremely attached to you, but she cannot marry you — you are just where you are now."

"That is all you know about it!" returned the young man, somewhat rudely. "So far from being where I am now, I shall have lost all that makes the present so delightful, in spite of its uncertainty, — her friendship, her kindness, her intimacy."

"Is it possible that you think Irma would be changed to you?" Camilla asked with surprise.

"No," he answered, "I don't think so. *She* would be just the same, and perhaps would expect

that I should be also. But it would be impossible. Women can never understand that. I often wonder if they have no hearts, that they seem unable to comprehend what the rejection of his love means to a man."

"Perhaps lack of vanity, as well as lack of heart, has something to do with their obtuseness," Camilla suggested. "But we won't argue the point, only — I believe you made a declaration to Irma in Paris, and you did n't think it necessary to forswear her acquaintance because she did not reciprocate your sentiments."

"That was different; the whole situation was different. She did not really answer me, and then her father interfered, and insisted that I should promise not to speak to her again — at least not at that time. I remember well that he said, 'After we have left France I lay no embargo on you. In the future, if you desire to do so, you may seek her and try your fortune again' — He was very kind," the young man ended with softening voice.

"He could n't possibly have been anything else," said Camilla. "I wonder if he had any idea of the money which was waiting for them. But it would n't have made the least difference to him if he had, he would have told you to try your fortune all the same. And now that the future of which he spoke is here, and Irma is here, just as unchanged as he would have been, and you are here, I cannot see why you hesitate to try it."

"'He either fears his fate too much,
Or his deserts are small,
Who dares not put it to the touch
To win or lose it all,'"

Norbert quoted. "No doubt I fear my fate too much, and I know that my deserts are small, so you see there is reason enough for my fearing to put it to the touch."

Camilla stopped short, and faced round upon him with sudden energy.

"See here!" she said. "All this is yourself, yourself, and again yourself! Do you not think of Irma at all? — Oh, you need not be offended and glower at me! I mean just what I say. It is all pure selfishness. You are holding back, through fear of receiving a wound in your heart or your vanity, without considering her at all. And yet you should feel that you are here as a providential person. Do you think it would make any difference to me whether she married you or not if I did not believe that the choice lies between you and Mr. Hastings?"

She flung out the question scornfully, caught her breath, and went on quickly:

"Now the reason I say you are providential is because you possess the only thing which can possibly prove stronger than his attractions, for he has certainly great attractions, and that is your hold on Irma through her affection and loyalty to the past. But instead of using this great advantage properly, instead of rushing like an old knight — I mean, a knight of the old time — to defend her and defeat him, here you are 'fearing your fate too much,' and all such selfish stuff. I have no patience with you — none!"

"So it appears," said Norbert, who was a little astonished by this outburst. He, too, stopped when

she faced so suddenly upon him, and now stood with his hands in his pockets, regarding her.

"It is not altogether true that I have been thinking only of myself," he said. "If it were so, I honestly believe that I should have gone away as soon as I saw and understood how rich she is. That was my first impulse. But then — without considering that I had any providential part to play, it did occur to me that I might try my luck, even although she *is* so rich, because, if I succeeded, I should save her from that fellow, Hastings. To leave her to him without a struggle was more than I could do. And yet I have not much hope. She is as kind to me as ever, but not more so, and *he* — as you say, he has great attractions, such as fascinate women. To speak to her might be only to end everything, to be sent away — to leave the field open to him —"

The young fellow broke off in his disjointed yet sufficiently intelligible speech. His eyes met Camilla's with an appeal which touched her and put an end to her impatience. She extended her hand and laid it on his arm with a very kind gesture.

"I am a wretch," she said, "to scold you, and accuse you of thinking only of yourself, when it seems you are thinking of Irma as much as I am. *Eh bien*, let us now talk reasonably. This, you see, is a very serious matter. It is not merely a question of disappointing one man or another. *That*" — she shrugged her shoulders — "is the fortune of war. It is a question of Irma's whole life. For who knows her as we do? And we know that it would be the greatest misfortune which could

befall her to marry this selfish, worldly, mercenary man, who would break her heart with no more consideration that he would crush a butterfly; and who would break it, too, without even knowing that he *was* breaking it, they are so different. She does n't see this — poor Irma, she was always a dreamer! — but we see it and know it, and we must prevent it. We are her only friends, for these people here — *pouf!* their friendship does not amount to that!" — and Miss Vincent snapped her fingers — "so we must enter into a league, and, if we can avoid it, we must make no false steps. Perhaps you are right, perhaps it is better not to risk anything by haste, yet I am afraid — there is no good in denying that I am very much afraid of this man, and I want to see his influence ended."

"You cannot possibly want to see it ended as much as I do," said Norbert, gloomily. "But how to end it — that is the question."

It was a question over which they shook their heads together, as they paced on in the springlike softness of the late afternoon. It was one of the days — there were many now — when Norbert, having given a few hours' work to his picture of Mr. Hastings and his dogs, which was in progress at the cottage of the latter, had strolled over from Idlesse, as the place was called, to Argyle. In the hedge-enclosed spot which Irma always said reminded her of a nook in an Italian garden, he had found herself and Camilla, and there was a little of the intercourse he loved, when they three alone would talk of the past, of their artistic friends, of the chatter of the Paris studios, of their own ambitions and hopes

— it was delightful, but it did not last. In these days it never lasted. First Hastings strolled up, with his dogs at his heels; then Mrs. Treherne came out from the house with Mrs. Lawton and Rapier, and finally Father Thorne joined the group, saying that as he was passing Argyle, feeling a little tired and thirsty, he thought he would drop in for a cup of tea. It was a pleasant little gathering, the more pleasant because wholly accidental, of people who, with the exception of Mrs. Treherne, were all more than ordinarily clever, but Norbert soon wearied of it. The talk fell upon topics in which he had no interest, — for his devotion to art was not only a narrow devotion, but his sympathies were further narrowed just now by a personal and absorbing passion. He did not very much care to be near Irma unless he could monopolize her attention; so he took his leave. Seeing the cloud which had come over him, Camilla rose also, volunteering to accompany him to the gates; and they walked away together. Mrs. Treherne had looked after them approvingly.

"That is a conjunction which strikes me as very appropriate," she said to Hastings. "It would be a good thing if it became permanent."

"A good thing for whom?" he asked. "Hardly, I think, for the persons concerned, and if not for them, for whom, then?"

Mrs. Treherne's glance turned toward Irma.

"Possibly," she said, "for her. You are perhaps not aware that every one is talking of her intimacy with that young man — wherever I go I am assailed with questions — that her name is constantly asso-

ciated with his. *Anything* that would remove him would be a good thing."

"One might employ an assassin," said Hastings, reflectively. "Short of that, I confess I perceive no means of getting rid of him. And I really don't think he is sufficiently dangerous to justify such extreme measures."

Mrs. Treherne showed her appreciation of this mockery by a flash of anger.

"How exactly like you," she said, "to take for granted that no one can be dangerous who is opposed to you! If it were not for — well, for some things which it is unnecessary to enter into, I should not be sorry if you had a lesson in the possibility of defeat."

He met her angry eyes with the composure which always had such power to exasperate her.

"It is a very useful lesson," he said, "and no man can be sure that he will not be forced to learn it — sometimes in the most unexpected manner and from adversaries whom he has despised."

XV

THAT Irma herself was during this time altogether unconscious of the schemes, the various hopes and fears, of those around her, was not surprising. She was not thinking of herself. She was absorbed in the trifling events, the pleasant happenings of each day. And in her enjoyment of all that followed the arrival of Camilla and Norbert, she had almost forgotten that past episode when the latter had startled her by an avowal of passion

altogether out of accord with their frank and friendly relations. It was part of her inexperience to fancy that what she had then said had ended any hope he might have entertained of possible return of this passion, and that henceforth their intercourse was to be on the former footing of good comradeship. Many hints of Camilla might have undeceived her, but to these hints she turned a deaf ear. It was so much easier to believe the thing she wished to believe than to lessen her pleasure in the society of this old friend and comrade by any sense of constraint. And so to her, as to many another, fate came with noiseless tread, unseen and unsuspected. It was Norbert, of course, who finally gave the shock, the touch of reality, which wakened her from agreeable dreaming. And he gave it, not so much in obedience to Camilla's urging, nor yet from the deeper urging of his own passion, as from one of those impulses which seem to lie outside of will, and certainly outside of premeditation.

It chanced in this wise: On another day when he left Idlesse and strolled over to Argyle, he had what he felt to be the rare good fortune of finding Irma alone. She was not in the garden this afternoon, but in the library, and as he was shown in she rose from her seat before a writing-desk.

"Have you ever thought of the exact significance of the word 'welcome'?" she asked gayly. "It occurs to me at this moment how appropriate it is that I should say to you, 'Well come!' For you come very well, very opportunely, to give me an excuse to leave some tiresome accounts. Sit down and I will ring for tea."

With a sigh of satisfaction Norbert obeyed. This was just what he would have asked had he been bidden to express his desires as he walked over to Arygle: the quiet of the beautiful flower-scented room, no one present beside Irma, and a cup of fragrant tea given by her hands and sweetened by the glances of her eyes.

"What a pleasure it is to find you without a circle of people around you!" he said. "I have begun to think of late that, like royalty, you would always have a court about you."

"Do you call Camilla, and sometimes Mrs. Treherne, and occasionally one or two other people, a court?" she asked. "I have thought our little gatherings were very pleasant, and that you enjoyed them like the rest of us."

"So I have," he made haste to say; "but I enjoy still more finding you alone. It is like having a good thing all to oneself or sharing it with others, and I confess I am selfish enough to desire to have my good things unshared."

"But the society of a friend is something which can be shared without any loss," Irma said.

"Do you think so?" he returned. "I am afraid that only shows that you have never valued anything of the kind in the way I mean."

"You are not very flattering," she said. "As a matter of fact, 'I count myself in nothing else so happy as in a soul remembering my good friends;' and, I may add, valuing them."

"Good friends!" he repeated, a little impatiently. "Oh, yes! you are faithful and kind in remembering your friends; nobody knows that better than I.

But to value the society of one person so much that you cannot endure to share it with any one else — you do not know what that is."

There was a moment's pause. A quick, intuitive sense told Irma that the conversation touched a dangerous point. She was glad of the diversion of the tea at this moment.

"It strikes me as a very selfish sentiment," she said, as she gave him his cup, "and I cannot regret that I do not know what it is. But let us talk of something else. What have you been doing to-day? Making studies of Mr. Hastings and his dogs?"

"Exactly; only the studies have been made in different ways. The dogs are noble creatures, and I enjoy painting them; but the man is a very subtle subject. In order to preserve my reputation for portraiture of character, I have been endeavoring to study him, and I find much which it will be difficult to express."

Irma looked up with interest.

"Mr. Hastings is not what one would call a simple character, but he does not strike me as very complex," she observed.

"That is just what he is, however," said Norbert, with decision. "He has not only a complex character, but one which is made up of so many contradictory qualities that they attract and repel in equal degree." He paused a moment, but Irma did not speak; and he went on: "What attract are certain qualities of brilliancy and generosity; and what repel are the cynicism and thorough materialism of the man."

"Perhaps you don't know Mr. Hastings very

well," said Irma, with a quick rush of color to her cheeks. "I have seen a great deal of him since I came here, and I have never discovered any signs of cynicism or materialism."

"Have you looked for them very closely?" Norbert inquired significantly. "Believe me they are easily to be found, although Mr. Hastings is not likely to obtrude them on you."

"And why not on me as well as on others?" she asked, in something of a challenging tone.

Their eyes met. The moment had come for frankness. To Norbert, at least, reticence was no longer possible. The very look in those eyes — such a look as he had never seen in them before — warned him that, if he was ever to speak, now was the time to do so.

"Surely," he said, "you don't ask that question in earnest? Surely you must know, what every one else knows, that Mr. Hastings wishes to marry the heiress of the Darracote fortune, and therefore is not likely to show any side of his character which would make success in that end more difficult."

Irma had a sense of almost physical pain, as if she had been struck a cruel blow by a friendly hand, or at least a hand which she had fancied friendly. Indignation overpowered her, and for an instant she was conscious of a suffocating inability to speak. She put her hand to her throat, as she looked at Norbert.

"I could not have imagined you were capable of speaking in such a manner!" she said at length. "It is shameful to make such charges, to impute such motives. What do you know of Mr. Hastings?

And if you knew more, how could you venture to sit in judgment on his character, his sincerity? It is shameful!" she repeated with a passionate intonation.

"It is never shameful to speak the truth," Norbert answered, stung by her tone and look; "and what I have told you is the truth. This man is your suitor because you are a rich woman. He would not be your suitor if you were again — as I would to God might be possible! — the Irma Darracote whom I knew and loved in Paris. If you don't believe this, it can only be because you are as blind to his motives as to his character. And for that character, if you could know how steeped he is in cynicism, in materialism, in absolute lack of faith toward man or toward God — "

"And when have *you* gained such faith in either that you can venture to criticise another for lack of it?" she asked.

"If I have not gained faith," he said, "I have at least gained, through you, the knowledge of what faith should be. But this man has not even that, — he does not believe in the possibility of unselfishness in man nor of existence for God."

"And this," she said, with scorn vibrating in her voice, "is your return to him for his aid to you, his kindness, his generosity!"

The artist drew himself up quickly and proudly.

"I have no need of Mr. Hastings' aid," he answered; "and for his kindness and generosity — do you think I do not understand that these things are merely bids for your favor? He knew that it would please you if he showed me some patronage,

and so the patronage came. And I accepted it — shall I tell you why? Simply in order that I might study him, gauge him, learn what manner of man he is. For" — his voice broke into appeal — "it cannot be that it is too late: that you have given him your heart!"

"What is it to you?" Irma demanded. Her head was thrown back with a defiant air such as he had never seen in her before; her eyes were shining, her whole aspect had a vivid beauty which caught and fascinated his artistic sense. "You take a great liberty," she went on. "You have no right to speak to me in this manner."

"Right! — no, I have no right," he replied with sudden humility. "I love you with all my heart and soul, but *that* gives no right. For myself I have no hope. I see that I am no nearer to gaining your heart than when you turned from me in Paris. But I would do anything on earth to save you from this man, who thinks only of your fortune, and who has not a single high or spiritual quality in his nature to answer to your own."

Irma sank back in her chair. She was now quite pale.

"I think," she said, "that I have heard enough. Will you go away now? To discuss such subjects as these is impossible, and I will try to forget — "

"No," said Norbert, with sudden violence. He leaned forward, and, before she could prevent him, seized the hand that lay on the arm of her chair, holding it in the tight clasp of both his own. "No," he repeated, "don't try to forget anything. On the contrary, remember everything that I have said;

and think of all that it means if you surrender your heart and your soul to such a man as this of whom we have spoken. And believe that I have had no motive in anything which I have said except the motive of warning, of saving you. For myself, I repeat again that I have no hope; and all that I ask is to be able to do you the service of giving you one man's love by which to test another man's — professions."

He broke off abruptly, kissed the hand which he held passionately, almost roughly, and, rising, walked out of the room.

XVI

Do you the service of giving you one man's love by which to test another man's — professions.

These words rang in Irma's ears as she sat alone, after the sound of Norbert's footsteps had died away, and silence again gathered about her in the stately room. Her pulses were beating with a rush that made itself felt over her whole body; her breath came short and quick; the hand which Norbert had held and kissed clinched itself as if for a blow. A passion of indignation shook her from head to foot. "How dared he! — how dared he!" she repeated to herself again and again. How dared he make himself a standard of sincerity by which to try another, whom he ventured to accuse of insincerity! How dared he come and attempt to disturb her faith in a friend whose friendship had already meant so

much to her, and who day by day entered more deeply, more necessarily into her life!

Every instinct of her nature resented the suspicions suggested to her. For there are characters so essentially loyal, so integrally sincere, so absolutely devoid of the qualities from which the poison of suspicion springs, that to believe ill of those whom they have once trusted is to them almost impossible. This was so much the case with Irma that, so far from wakening in her mind any real doubt of Hastings' sincerity, Norbert had only roused all the force of generous loyalty which filled the girl's soul like a passion. She would have scorned herself had she been ready to heed anything which impugned the good faith of one who had given her no reason to distrust him. And she was more angry than she had ever before in her life been conscious of being with the man who, not content with forcing his own love upon her, ventured to declare that another man had only interested motives in all that he professed, or might yet profess, of friendship or deeper attachment.

"It was base!" she said, bringing her hand down violently on the arm of her chair. And then suddenly anger and indignation gave way to a sense of the deep wound she had received, — a wound deeper and more cruel in that it came from the hand of a friend. With an insupportable realization of how entirely her life was without any strong and stable foundation of assured affection on which she might rely, she bent her head down on the open desk beside her and gave way to passionate weeping.

The sobs which shook her from head to foot were not loud, but they rendered her unaware of the

opening of the door of the room; and they struck immediately and painfully on the ear of Hastings, who, according to his now familiar custom, entered unannounced.

He paused, uncertain whether to retreat without making his presence known or to advance. He had little doubt that the first would have been the proper thing to do; but, for once, doing the proper thing seemed of far less importance than making an effort to learn the cause of this grief, and perhaps comforting it. So, after that brief, involuntary pause, he walked quickly across the room, and, giving himself no time to think, laid a gentle clasp on the hands thrown above the dark, bowed head.

"Forgive me," he said, as Irma lifted herself with a start, "but I cannot help asking what it is that distresses you so much?"

To the girl who had neither seen nor heard him enter, there was something so strange in his sudden appearance, in that unexpected pressure of the hand, and in the gaze of solicitude bent upon her, that she had a momentary sense, as if her need had summoned him and he was there to reassure and comfort. She looked at him with an absolute unconsciousness of her brimming eyes and tear-stained face.

"How did you come here?" she asked.

"In the simplest manner possible," he replied. "I walked in, feeling quite sure that I should find the usual group gathered here for tea, and instead I find you alone and in deep distress. Perhaps I should have gone away without disturbing you. But how could I? It was impossible to see you in such grief without asking if I could do nothing to relieve it."

His tone was full of the most earnest apology. But, had he only known it, no apology was necessary; for his presence brought to Irma a wonderful consciousness of ease and relief. How or why this was so she could not have told; she only knew that the fact that he stood beside her, looking at her with an expression of tenderness and concern which he made no effort to disguise, filled her with a sense of well-being, of confidence so complete that her pain of a few minutes earlier seemed altogether fantastic and unreal.

"I have been very foolish," she said. "Believe me, it is not often that I am foolish — in this way."

"I am quite sure of it," he replied; "but such distress — forgive me! — must have had a deeper cause than merely that you were 'foolish,' which is a statement I beg leave to discredit."

"You need not discredit it, for what could be more foolish than to be hurt and angered by assertions, insinuations — words merely, without proof? And it was that I suffered myself to be."

"What has more power to hurt and anger than just those things, — assertions, insinuations, words without proof?" he asked. As he spoke, he sat down opposite her in the chair which Norbert had occupied. "Sometimes," he said, "there is relief in speaking of what has troubled and annoyed one. If it would relieve you to speak of the things which have distressed you, remember that we are friends by a very solemn covenant of friendship, and that you may trust my discretion and my sympathy."

"I have not forgotten our covenant of friendship," she answered; "and I do not doubt either your

discretion or your sympathy. But why should I trouble you with what is unworthy of attention? Some things are very intangible when one attempts to describe them. I can only say that the air about me seemed filled with things which I detest — ugly shadows of suspicion, unworthy beliefs, low standards. I seemed drawn toward the hateful point — which many people call worldly wisdom — of finding nothing in which to trust with the absoluteness that alone makes trust of value. Ideas had been suggested to me which I scorned, and yet they made me unhappy. *Not*, you will understand," — and she looked at him with an air of earnest pleading for comprehension, — "because I entertained them, but because I felt their injustice, and because they made me realize with great force how entirely alone in the world I am, with no one of whose affection I can say, '*Here* I may rest; *here* no shadow of doubt, no fear of any interested motive, can enter.'"

The perfect simplicity of her manner, the perfect sincerity of her tone, made Hastings feel that in thus speaking out her thoughts with almost childlike openness she had for the moment forgotten what an appeal to himself her words contained, and what an opening they afforded for a declaration of disinterestedness on his part. It is doubtful whether he would have taken advantage of anything so obvious, even had she given him an opportunity to do so; but after an instant she went on:

"That is why I have always disliked this wealth which came to me so unexpectedly. If my father had lived, all would have been different. I should not only have wanted nothing and nobody beside him, but his

wisdom would have been a sure guide, and his love —" Her voice failed and she stopped for a moment. "But he was taken away just when my need was greatest, and since what God does is always best, I can only suppose that it was His will I should be taught to stand alone. But I learn my lesson very badly; and while loneliness is hard to bear, I find something even harder, — something which is *unbearable;* and that is the constant suggestion that I must distrust every sentiment which is offered me, and every attachment which might sweeten life. Do you wonder that, considering this, I feel sometimes as if I must cast away the burden, — as if I must find some way of ridding myself of the money which seems to poison the thoughts of every one around me?"

There was an accent in her voice which went to the heart of the man listening to her, — a revelation which touched him more deeply than words can readily express. Up to this time he had considered very lightly all that she had said regarding her inheritance and the burden which it laid upon her. It is difficult for the most unworldly to take seriously a trouble which is based upon the possession of too much wealth; and Hastings made no pretensions to unworldliness. While never doubting the sincerity of what she expressed, he had smiled over it as over something fanciful and unreal. But now he saw that it possessed a reality of the most undoubted kind, and that it was a trouble which, for one of her nature, struck at the very root of all that makes life of value.

In his sudden comprehension of this, — in the opening, as it were, of the eyes of his soul which

had hitherto been closed, — he did not think of himself; but if he had done so, he would have received one of those revelations which come to us now and again in life, making us feel as if the person of whom, after all, we know least is the mysterious being called *ego*. What process of change or development had been going on within him during the period of his association with one whom he had first approached in a spirit of sufficiently cold calculation, it is impossible to say. These processes are imperceptible, and we only learn of them at last by their result. It was such a result which forced itself upon Hastings now, when, with all thought of the Darracote fortune far removed from his mind, he felt only the imperative need to give the woman he loved the assurance of his devotion.

"No," he said gently, in answer to her last words, "I do not wonder that you feel in this manner. But are you not falling into something of the same error as those you condemn? — are you not giving an importance to your wealth which it does not deserve? For some people the whole world is moved and swayed entirely by mercenary motives; but we know what to think of such people: we know that they attribute to others only the sentiments of which they are capable themselves —"

"Not always," she interposed. "Misjudgment may spring from other motives; sometimes those who are least mercenary may suspect — may be led to believe things which are unworthy —"

She faltered and paused, but Hastings understood what she wished to express; he knew that it was of Norbert she was thinking, Norbert whom she wished

to excuse. He made a slight gesture of indifference; for, as a matter of fact, the artist had not been in his mind at all, although he was aware that Irma had seen him, that he had left her very shortly before his own arrival, and that something which he had said was the immediate cause of her distress. What that might have been, however, was to Hastings a matter of no importance. He could readily imagine all that a jealous lover under such circumstances would say, and disdainfully gave him the credit for sincerity which he deserved.

"Let us not speak of other people, then," he said, in a tone as indifferent as his gesture. "There is really no need to do so; for whatever their motives may have been matters nothing. That there is such a thing as disinterested affection I am sure you do not for a moment doubt, and you cannot be so blind as not to be aware that you are peculiarly fitted to inspire it. Even a hardened man of the world" — he smiled a little — "might become as unmercenary as a hero of romance by the simple magic of knowing and loving you. For to know you *is* to love you, — at least I have found it so. When we first met I had not the faintest expectation of falling in love with you. The thing itself seemed something as long forgotten as a dream of boyhood, and no more to be hoped for than a miracle. I was interested in you, and honestly determined to be your friend. But love, — I could not have imagined it possible. And yet the miracle, the impossible, has come to pass. I find myself loving you with a passion which grows with every day, and the greatest happiness I can hope for is that you will suffer my love to become that support for your life,

and that rest for your heart, of the want of which you have spoken so sadly."

The quiet, restrained tones ceased, but Irma did not answer. It was, he saw at a glance, the strong reaction of emotion which held her speechless. Leaning back in the tall, carved chair, she looked almost like a statue: white, silent, her dark-lashed eyes cast down, her hands clasped together in her lap. She scarcely seemed to breathe as Hastings went on:

"You see, I am not in the least afraid of any misjudgment from you; in fact, I should not even allude to the possibility of such a thing but for what has gone before. Of course I understand that I have been the special mark for the suggestions which have wounded you, but I know you too well to believe that you heeded them — "

The dark eyes suddenly lifted now with a glance at once proud and sweet.

"I never gave them even an instant's heed," Irma said.

His look thanked her eloquently.

"I was quite sure of it. And I know that whether or not you can accept what I offer, — which is the devotion and service of my life, — you will not doubt my sincerity; and therefore your faith in the possibility of a disinterested love may be revived and strengthened by this assurance of mine. I shall be happy to do even so much as this for you, — if I can do no more."

His voice dropped over the last words with a questioning accent, while his gaze still held her own. But there was little need of questioning; for there was no mistaking the nature of the change which came over

"The quiet, restrained tones ceased, but Irma did not answer."

Irma's face. By a transformation as sudden as it was wonderful, every sign of distress vanished; the exquisite lips smiled, the eyes shone with a radiance like the lighting of lamps. Dreams, doubts, fears were over. Psyche wakened to her heritage of joy, unmindful of that other heritage of pain which is forever linked with it. Hastings fairly caught his breath as the beautiful face, with such a light as he had never seen on it before, bent toward him.

"But you can do more, — much more!" she whispered.

BOOK IV

THE AWAKENING OF PSYCHE

I

"IRMA, I could not — I would not believe it if you did not tell me yourself!"

It was Camilla who spoke, in a tone of such intense dismay and disappointment that it fell with chilling effect upon Irma's ear. It had never occurred to her that she could not reckon upon Camilla's sympathy in her happiness, — Camilla, who alone belonged to her, not only by ties of past association but by the deeper ties of blood. However, there was no mistaking either the words or the tone of deep disapproval; and in an instant Irma understood that sympathy was to be denied to her even here.

The light — and a very sweet and tender light it was — faded out of her face as she looked at the figure standing before her with an air of almost tragic protest.

"And why," she asked quietly, "would you not believe it?"

Camilla made one of those dramatic motions with which the Southern races express so much.

"Why not!" she repeated. "Because I could never have imagined that you would think of marrying a man who is as cold as — as an iceberg, and who cares for nothing but your fortune."

It was the fate of Irma, as it is of most people of great outward gentleness and sweetness of nature, occasionally to astonish those who inadvertently drew forth a hidden fire of the existence of which they were ignorant. A flash of this fire had scorched Norbert, and another flash now startled Camilla.

"How do you venture to say such things?" she asked, in a tone of sudden, passionate indignation. "What do you know of Mr. Hastings that you can be certain that he cares for nothing but my fortune?"

Camilla drew back a step. She could scarcely believe that it was Irma who had spoken, Irma who was looking at her with those flashing eyes.

"Have I made you angry?" she asked, in a tone the wonder of which was for that astonishing fact. "I thought that I might speak — the truth."

"The truth!" Irma echoed. "What right have you to call your opinions the truth? You may believe them to be true, but that is a very different thing from their *being* so."

"There is nobody who would not agree with me," cried Camilla, thus put upon her defence. "Everybody knows — even I, a stranger, have heard it on all sides — that it was fully understood before you came that Mr. Hastings was to marry the Darracote heiress. People even say that it was arranged between himself and the old man who died. It was a thing fully understood and expected. But I laughed when it was talked of to me. 'Oh, you will see!' I said. 'Mr. Hastings may be irresistible to most women, but he will not prove irresistible to Miss Darracote. A *blasé* man of society is not likely to fascinate *her*. She has known real men; she has

been brought up in a world where money did not rule everything, but where men had higher ambitions, higher ideals; and she will never be deceived by anything that Mr. Hastings may profess to offer her, — you can be sure of that.' And yet now you tell me that you *have* been fascinated, that you are deceived by professions which deceive nobody else, and that you are going to marry this man who is thinking only of your money and not of yourself."

She flung the words out with biting emphasis, more intent, more eager, upon making good her point, upon telling Irma what she was sure no one save herself would venture to tell her, than upon observing the effect of her assertions. When she paused, however, she was struck and startled by this effect, — by the strange whiteness of the familiar face and the deepening fire in the splendid eyes under the dark, straight brows. They were alone together in Irma's room, filled with a soft glow of mingled firelight and shaded lamplight, all its pretty luxury suggestive of pleasant things, the room in which they had sat night after night at this hour, talking gayly and unrestrainedly of the events of the day, the people they had met, perhaps of the past or sometimes of the future, but always as friends whose intimacy could know neither change nor shadow. And now — how great a change, how deep a shadow, lay between them as they faced each other on the white fur rug before the rosy fire!"

"And this is the effect of money!" Irma said. "*This* — to poison the mind so that it has no belief in human sincerity! Do *you*, then, value me only for what I possess, that you so unhesitatingly charge another person with mercenary intentions?"

"I!" cried Camilla. The blood rushed to her face, — was it perhaps because in her inmost soul she knew that Irma had acquired an added value in her eyes from her great possessions? "I don't think that I need answer that question," she said, throwing up her head. "The past should answer it for me, — the past when you had no fortune nor any thought of one."

"And if in that past, when I had no fortune, you and — a few others found something in me to love, why is it impossible to believe that I can now win any affection which is disinterested?" Irma asked, a note of unconscious pathos coming into the tones of her voice.

"But no one does — no one *could* think so!" Camilla cried. "Of course you are as capable of winning disinterested affection now as you were then. What is impossible is to believe that Mr. Hastings offers you such an affection."

"I don't see that the nature of Mr. Hastings' affection concerns any one beside myself," Irma returned proudly; "but, as a matter of curiosity, I should like to know what reason you have for making such a charge against the honor and good faith of a man of whom you know very little?"

"I know enough to be sure of what I have said," Camilla replied. "The first moment that I saw Mr. Hastings I recognized to what class he belonged, — the class of men who are cynical and worldly to the core. Good Heavens!" — there was no doubting the girl's earnest sincerity, — "have not *I* cause to know them? Do you think a woman could be on the stage even as short a time as I have been and not

recognize such a man at a glance? If Mr. Hastings or any one like him made any profession of attachment to me, I should simply laugh at him; I should understand what it meant. But *you*, O my poor Irma! the trouble is that you have no knowledge whatever of such men. No nun in her cloister could possibly know less. For it was almost like a cloister, the studio of the dear father, who was always preaching ideals too high for this world. One might have foreseen how it would be when you went out into the real world. You would think everybody had standards like his, and so you would fall a victim to some schemer who could profess everything and feel nothing."

With a gesture of hopelessness the speaker fell again into the chair from which she had risen when Irma first made the announcement of her news. She threw herself back, her arms above her head.

"If only you could have cared for poor Norbert!" she said, with something like a groan. "It seems so strange that you could n't. He is an artist, he is full of all kinds of ideals and fancies, and he loves you passionately — and honestly."

The last word, with all that it implied, stung Irma afresh; again the flash of indignation came into her dark eyes.

"And the only reason you have to give for your charge of insincerity against Mr. Hastings is that he reminds you of certain other men whom you have known!" she said. "Is it possible that you don't see the shallowness of such a judgment? But whether you do or not is a matter of no importance — "

"My judgment may be shallow and of no impor-

tance," Camilla interrupted, "but how about that of others? Ask your friend Mrs. Royal Smith what she thinks of Mr. Hastings. I am sure you will find that she thinks just as I do. And if you want to know still more, ask Mrs. Treherne. There is n't the least doubt but that *she* could give you some very interesting information."

To the credit of Camilla, it may be stated that the last part of her speech was entirely unpremeditated and drawn forth by the disdain in Irma's eyes, which did not lessen at the mention of Mrs. Royal Smith. Well, — such was the quick, unconscious thought in the mind of the speaker — if she would heed nothing less than the whole truth, let her have it. With her natural shrewdness quickened by dislike, the girl had soon divined something of Mrs. Treherne's attitude toward Hastings; and then a question or two discreetly put to new acquaintances had drawn forth enough of ancient history to justify conclusions which came exceedingly near the truth.

"The woman both loves and hates him," Camilla had thought, having surprised very significant gleams in Mrs. Treherne's eyes; "but for some reason she is anxious to hand Irma over to him. As for him, it is hard to say whether or not he cares at all for *her*, — sometimes I have seen him look at her as if he quite despised her, — but, of course, the only point of any importance with him is the fortune. It is a very good thing that Norbert and I have come in time to disappoint them both."

For of the power of herself and Norbert to disappoint them, Camilla entertained little doubt until Irma's announcement of her engagement to Hastings

had come upon her like a thunderbolt. Naturally she had not been able to restrain the expression of her disapproval and disappointment, and of the opinions on which these sentiments were based. But she had never meant to mention Mrs. Treherne. The tongue, however, as we know, is an unruly member, and almost before she knew what she was doing the look in Irma's eyes had drawn forth her last words.

Whatever their remote effect might be, their immediate effect was only to intensify the expression which had exasperated her.

"Do you think," said Irma, in a tone of infinite scorn, "that the opinion of Mrs. Royal Smith or anything which Mrs. Treherne could say would make me doubt one to whom I have given faith and" — she paused an instant — "love? For surely you understand that it is final when one gives these things. They are not to be taken back. If, by any chance, it should be proved that one had given them amiss, then" — she, on her part, now made a dramatic Italian gesture — "shipwreck might come, but one could not regain what has passed out of one's possession. All that would be left then would be to suffer. But I have no fear of that," she said proudly. "You judge Mr. Hastings, with worldly knowledge, from the outside. I, who have no worldly knowledge, — and, God knows, do not desire it, seeing what it makes of people, — I *know* him as he is within. You do not believe this: you think that I am blinded by his fascinations and deceived by his protestations; and I shall not condescend to attempt to make you think otherwise. You must believe what you please of him and of me. But after to-night I will never

hear another word like those you have spoken. For the sake of our old friendship I have listened to them once, but I will never listen again. Henceforth whoever attacks his honor or his sincerity attacks mine. There is no difference."

The quiet tones, with their accent of indescribable loftiness, ceased; and Camilla sat motionless, lost in amazement. Again she asked herself, was this Irma, — *this?* The old truth, old as humanity and trite as human experience, that we know nothing of each other until under the stress of some strong emotion the true, inner self is revealed, came to her with the force of revelation. What had the Irma she had known, the gentle, charming girl, who always yielded so exquisitely to the least pressure or claim from those to whom she was attached, what had that Irma in common with this woman, in whom the deep fountains of passion had been opened, and with whom loyalty found such proud expression? It was a marvellous awakening, — a marvellous revelation of that mighty power of love, which is God's greatest instrument to melt and mould, to torture, to enrapture, and to purify the hearts of men and women.

II

NORBERT was standing in his studio with a very moody and abstracted air, — not painting but only mixing some colors on his palette, — when a knock at the door made him start and frown. He turned sharply, and the frown did not disappear when he saw Camilla.

Miss Vincent nodded easily as she advanced into the room. She was dressed charmingly and seemed in the best of spirits.

"Good-morning!" she said. "Since I have heard nothing of any sittings lately, I thought I had better call and inquire what has become of my portrait."

The artist looked at her for an instant without replying. Then he pointed to a corner of the room where some canvases stood with faces turned to the wall.

"There it is," he said briefly.

Camilla lifted her eyebrows, whether at the fact or his manner did not appear, walked over to the canvases, and turned first one and then another around until she found her own unfinished portrait. With this in her hand she returned to where he still stood by the large easel, mixing his colors.

"Now," she said, setting the picture on a chair, "I want to know the meaning of this. What have *I* done that you should treat me in such a manner? You took a commission to paint this portrait; and, since I am limited in time, it was agreed that you should do it at once. Yet, after having heard nothing from you for a fortnight, I come and find it thrown aside in a half-finished state."

Again the young man did not answer immediately, but now he kept his eyes fixed on his palette. It was without raising them that he presently said, in a reluctant tone:

"I should have let you know. I have decided to give up the commission. I am giving up all that I can, in order to leave this place as soon as possible."

Camilla regarded him with a very contemptuous expression.

"If you do, you will act like a fool and a coward," she said concisely. "Yes," — as he glanced up at her angrily, — "that is very plain speech, I know. But sometimes plain-speaking is necessary. It is like knocking a man down to bring him to his senses. And I mean exactly what I say. You will be a fool if you throw up all your prospects here, just when success is assured, to go to some place where you will have to begin over again, without the advantages — "

He interrupted her impatiently.

"But suppose I desire to be rid of what you call advantages — that is, of fashionable patronage and all that accompanies it? I shall give up painting the portraits of rich people, and go back to Bohemia and be an artist again."

"Of course you can be as foolish as you like," she replied with crisp disdain; "but please allow me to finish what I was saying. You will also be a coward if you run away before you are defeated."

He stared at her with wonder overcoming the anger in his eyes.

"What do you mean?" he asked. "You know well that I *am* defeated. What is there left to fight for when — when — "

"When Irma is engaged to marry Mr. Hastings?" said Camilla, calmly supplying the words over which he faltered. "In my opinion, there is a good deal. Engagements may be broken, you know. Such things have been heard of."

She paused; but, since Norbert only continued to stare at her without replying, she went on:

"It was about this I came to talk to you. There

is reason to hope that something of the kind may occur, — not at once, perhaps, but eventually, — and I frankly confess that I would do anything in my power to bring it about. I thought that I might count on you to help, but if you are on the point of running away — "

She broke off, as Norbert made a step toward her.

"What do you mean?" he repeated. "I don't like hints and innuendoes, perhaps because I am too stupid to understand them. You must speak plainly if you want anything from me."

"So I perceive," she said. "You *are* stupid, — there is n't a doubt of that. Well, I will try to make things clear to you. But, first, we are not in Bohemia now, you know, and the proprieties must be considered. You will therefore please understand that I have come to give you a sitting. Put that portrait on the easel, while I call Margherita, whom I left below in the carriage. She does not understand English, so we can talk freely before her, while at the same time Mrs. Grundy will be propitiated."

Her command of the situation was now complete. While she left the room, Norbert placed the portrait on the easel; and when she returned, with Margherita, all was in readiness for her. A little later Mrs. Grundy, entering in person, would have found everything most proper, commonplace, and obvious, — the artist painting, the sitter maintaining her pose with an air of cheerful endurance, the maid seated at a window knitting. For some time only the picture was talked of; and Camilla's interest in it was so unfeigned and so lively that Norbert began to suspect that he had been tricked into resuming work upon it,

and that her visit had in reality no other object than this. But he was mistaken, for presently Camilla herself changed the subject abruptly.

"I believe," she said, "that you have not seen Irma since her engagement."

The frown returned to Norbert's brow.

"No," he replied curtly, "I have not seen her. Did you think it likely that I would call to offer my congratulations? She knows well what I feel, and also what I think of the man she is to marry."

"Have you expressed your opinion to her?"

"Very plainly. I told her that he was unworthy of her in every respect, — a selfish, mercenary man of the world; the type of a class detestable above all others."

"You were certainly frank. And the result — ?"

"Was that I made her very angry, and that I left her house with the determination never to enter it again."

"Our experiences are somewhat similar. I, too, expressed my opinion frankly; and I, too, made her more angry than I imagined it possible she could be. It is very plain that neither you nor I ever really understood her. We fancied that she was easily influenced because she was always so gentle, but there was never a greater mistake. When her feelings are roused, it is impossible to move her. She is loyalty personified, and the only way to prevent her marrying this man is to *prove* his unworthiness to her."

"But how is that to be accomplished?"

"Not by sulking in solitude and breaking off all intercourse with her and with him. It can be accomplished only by accepting matters as they are, and

making, or seeming to make, the best of them. When I saw that nothing was to be gained by opposition, I yielded gracefully, begged Irma's pardon, congratulated Mr. Hastings, and have been on the most friendly and amiable terms with both of them ever since."

Norbert's countenance expressed his disgust.

"I am no hypocrite," he said. "I cannot follow such an example."

"No," replied Camilla, "you are not a hypocrite, oh, no! You prefer to stand aloof, and let Irma walk straight to a mistake that will wreck her life, rather than put a little compulsion on yourself, restrain your feelings, keep up friendly relations with her and especially with *him*, and so perhaps find what we want, — the proof that he is thinking and caring only for her fortune."

Norbert turned toward her. There was something now beside misery and surliness on his clouded face.

"That," he said, "would be treachery. To pretend friendship with her and with him, in order that I might do them both the greatest injury possible — "

The girl stamped her foot with impatience.

"Listen to you!" she cried. "Would it be the greatest possible injury to her to save her from giving herself to a man who is unworthy of her and who will certainly make her miserable in the end? For if you think Irma could be other than miserable when she finds how she has been deceived and how little real sympathy there is between them, you don't know her at all. And would you call it treachery to expose his real motives and the falsity of his professions of love?"

Norbert held out his right hand.

"To lose *that*," he said, "would be to end everything for me, — all my career and all my hopes as an artist. Yet I would consent to lose it if by doing so I could ensure her happiness. But what you suggest — which is plainly to play a part, to act the spy, to try by underhand means to obtain proof which cannot be had by honorable means — is impossible. I cannot do it."

"You are very complimentary to me," returned Camilla, "if you think I have suggested anything dishonorable. All that I have proposed is that you shall do what I am doing, — accept what is for the present inevitable, but meanwhile resolve that if by any means this engagement can be broken it shall be done. I will not allow Irma to be sacrificed if I can help it. And in order to help it I should have few scruples. I believe that I shall succeed; I believe that if I can discover one or two things about Mr. Hastings, her eyes will be opened. But I need help, and you, if you were reasonable, could help me much."

"How?" Norbert asked, with visible signs of yielding in his face and manner.

"By going back to finish your portrait of Mr. Hastings. Stop!" — as he made an inarticulate protest — "think a moment. What do you gain by refusing to fulfil your engagement? Is it anything beside the gratification of indulging a resentment which can do him no harm and yourself no good? Bah! be more of a man! Go back and finish the work you have undertaken, whether you like it or not. And while finishing it, *keep your eyes and ears*

open. I don't ask you to be a spy, as you politely charge, but only to observe. I am sure of one thing: that there is some connection between Mr. Hastings and Mrs. Treherne, — some plot perhaps in which Irma is concerned. That woman was pleased when she heard of the engagement. I could swear to it. Now, why should she be pleased? People will tell you of an old love affair between Mr. Hastings and herself, and they say that he — what is the word? — oh, yes! that he *jilted* her. Is it likely, therefore, that she would be gratified at his marrying a young, beautiful, and immensely rich woman? And yet she was! There was no pretence about it. I watched her closely and I know that she was absolutely delighted. I determined then to find out what was the meaning of it, but I have not been able to do so yet. Now, I want you to come back and give me your help. We need to watch them both, — I at Argyle, you at Idlesse, — and between us we may discover something. Only think of it for a moment, — think of Irma as the dupe and victim of two such people; and if you ever really loved her, you will be ready to aid me in saving her."

Of Camilla's own sincerity there could be no doubt. She believed intensely every word that she uttered. To her mind there was no question of possible mistake in her apprehension of the situation. And it was owing partly to her stage life that she conceived this situation very melodramatically. What she had seen and heard of Eleanor Treherne fitted into such a conception, as well as her superficial reading of the character of Hastings. Although she was not aware of the fact, her curiosity and interest

were piqued and excited by the mystery which she instinctively perceived. She desired to know all that was to be known about these two, their past and present connection with each other, besides wishing to defeat their scheme with regard to Irma. For of the existence of such a scheme she had not an instant's doubt; and it filled her at once with passionate indignation and an equally passionate desire to prove her own power to cope with and overcome them. It is to be feared that in anticipating final triumph she gave little thought to all that Irma would suffer in such an event. To her, also, Irma had become what she resented her being to others, — simply a prize to be struggled for.

So much in brief explanation of her position, and of the effect which her words had upon Norbert, — an effect they could never have exerted but for the sincerity behind them. After her appeal the young artist hesitated for a moment, but it was only for a moment. She had touched in him the deepest and strongest passions known to man, — love, jealousy, the desire to save one beloved from a fate which it enraged him to think of, and perhaps (so complex is the heart) to repay her scorn by proving the truth of every accusation which have aroused it. All these feelings seconded Camilla's words with resistless force; so that, gazing at her with eyes which during his short hesitation had gathered a deeper fire, he said abruptly:

"It is not necessary to add anything more. You are right. If one can save her and disappoint him, one should not think of oneself. I do not see what I can accomplish by going back to his house; but if

there is the faintest hope of accomplishing anything, I am ready to go there, or anywhere else. Only, tell me exactly what you want me to do."

"*I want you to watch!*" said Camilla, impressively. "People often betray themselves in little things. It was by observing little things that I drew conclusions about Mrs. Treherne which I found afterward were perfectly correct. Now, I grant that Mr. Hastings is not the kind of person to betray himself; but even he may have his moments of weakness, or something may happen to surprise him. In case such a thing occurs I want you to be there."

"As a spy," remarked Norbert, with bitterness. "Very well. It is for *her*. I will go — and 'watch,' as you put it."

"I put it correctly," returned Camilla, with dignity. "But I am not afraid of a term. To save Irma I would *be* a spy, if necessary. I do not, however, consider that you will be one because you return to Mr. Hastings' house to fulfil an engagement."

"What is the good of pretences?" asked the young man, recklessly. "No engagement could take me back to that house if it were not for the hope of saving her. But I am on fire when I think of the situation as you have represented it, — she between those two schemers, who care only for her wealth! It is enough to madden one."

"It does not madden me," said Camilla, calmly. "It only makes me set my wits to work to scheme also, and defeat them. There is interest in it. It is like a game. I am determined that I will succeed, — that I will save Irma from them, and prove to Mrs. Treherne that she had good cause for disliking

me, as she did from the first moment that we saw each other."

Norbert looked at her with surprise.

"You and I are very different," he said. "I care nothing for interest or games, or the pleasure of proving myself a better schemer than people whom I despise. I care only for the end, and I would prefer to reach it by some other means than those which to me seem treacherous. But if there are no others, then I will take the means at hand, and do my best to discover what we want to know. That is all there is to be said on the subject."

He laid down his palette as he spoke; and Camilla, understanding this as a sign of dismissal, rose with a somewhat offended air.

"I see that you do not intend to do any real work on my portrait," she said, "so I may as well go. I hope that after a while you will be able to control your feelings — and your manners — a little better. When do you intend to return to Idlesse?"

"I don't know," he answered reluctantly. "I must write to Mr. Hastings. To-morrow, perhaps."

III

IT is hardly necessary to say that in Camilla's statement to Norbert of the situation as she conceived it, there were several mistakes. But on one point she was not mistaken, and this was in her assertion that Mrs. Treherne was genuinely pleased at Irma's engagement. Indeed a much duller person than Miss Vincent might have perceived the fact; for

while a simulated emotion may frequently be taken for a sincere one, it is not possible for any save the morbidly suspicious to fail in recognition of sincerity itself. Mrs. Treherne was without doubt sincerely pleased to learn that Hastings had prospered in his suit; and this pleasure was so warmly expressed that it surprised Irma, who had fancied, she could not tell why, that her chaperon would not be delighted. Besides surprise, she also felt something closely approaching to gratitude; for, after the scene with Norbert and the violent disapproval of Camilla, any approval was gratifying, even that of Mrs. Treherne. This lady was also kind enough to explain why her congratulations were so cordial.

"I am charmed," she had said, "not only because I am sure it is just what poor Uncle Darracote would have wished above all things, but because I really think you have made an excellent choice. Many people would not think so; for there is certainly a — well, a great dissimilarity between Mr. Hastings and yourself. But I believe that a certain amount of dissimilarity is a good basis for agreement. It is like counterparts: each has something which the other lacks. *You* are all spirituality, full of ideals and theories which would lead you into dreadful mistakes if you had no restraining influence; while *he* is, perhaps, a little too much the other way: a thorough man of the world — disillusionized, materialist —"

Here Irma had interrupted, flushing slightly.

"I think that you do Mr. Hastings injustice," she said. "He does not deserve to be called in any sense a materialist."

Mrs. Treherne smiled; and even Irma was able to

perceive that the smile was one of pity for the girl who fancied herself able to speak of Gerard Hastings with more knowledge than *she*, Mrs. Treherne, possessed.

"My dear," she said, "I have known Mr. Hastings a long time, and I think I know him fairly well. What I have said of him is true, but I don't think his materialism will ever trouble you. As I was going on to add, I think your influence on each other will be most beneficial; for I do not at all agree with those of your friends who think that you ought to marry an idealist like yourself, or some artist out of Bohemia. Everything points to your marriage with Gerard Hastings as the best thing possible, and I am simply delighted that it has been arranged."

With the same cordiality the speaker a little later offered her congratulations to Hastings himself; and he, too, recognized the note of sincerity with a surprise which had more definite foundation than that of Irma. It had been long, however, since he had ceased to trouble himself with any consideration of Mrs. Treherne when she was not immediately demanding his attention; and, having suitably acknowledged her good wishes, he now dismissed her from his thoughts. It was certainly astonishing that she should be pleased that he had succeeded where he could have sworn she would have been glad for him to fail; but her pleasure or her discomfiture was alike indifferent to him.

It was this indifference, together with very natural preoccupation, which prevented his observing that in the course of the next few days she several times attempted to obtain private speech with him. But this had now become difficult, without a co-operation

on his part which was clearly not to be reckoned upon. In the face of Irma's claims, she could no longer boldly summon him to her side; and chance, so far from befriending, had seemed maliciously set upon thwarting her. Or was it to Camilla rather than to chance that she owed one or two defeats? Once, hearing his voice in the hall and knowing that Irma was out, she had called him into that small, luxurious apartment which had come to be regarded as her private sitting-room. "This is like old times," she had declared, as she invited him by a gesture to a chair which was a silken nest of comfort. "Sit down. I have something important to say to you." Hastings, as in courtesy bound, obeyed the gesture. But the something important was not said; for at the moment Camilla appeared, charmingly arrayed in visiting costume, anxious to know if Mrs. Treherne intended to accompany her to certain houses that afternoon, and very much surprised to see Mr. Hastings!

Again, when after several disappointments she finally met him in the grounds one evening and turned to walk with him along the familiar paths, was it chance which brought Camilla suddenly across their way and induced her to join them? Mrs. Treherne felt quite certain that it was not chance: she was now sure that Camilla, prompted either by curiosity or by jealousy on behalf of her cousin, was watching her too closely for a private interview with Hastings to be possible at Argyle. Well, she would find or make her opportunity elsewhere, — that was all. What a fool the girl was to fancy that she could prevent it!

For reasons of her own, however, she was in no

haste. It is an old comparison to liken cruel women to the feline race, but the comparison is sometimes justified by curiously feline traits in certain women. As a tiger in the jungle or a domestic cat on the hearth-rug crouches in perfect quietness watching its prey, secure that it cannot escape, and betraying enjoyment only by the movement of the softly moving tail and a yellow gleam of half-closed eyes, so during the fortnight which elapsed before Camilla appeared in Norbert's studio Eleanor Treherne had watched Hastings, as he played his part of lover with a charming delicacy and grace. It was not a pleasant sight to her, although she had no belief in his sincerity; but it would have been far more unpleasant had she not entertained the agreeable conviction that she had but to put out her hand to find him in her power. For this moment she could wait, even as the tiger or the cat waits for its final spring; and there can be no doubt that her sense of anticipated enjoyment was in its nature extremely like theirs.

It happened, however, by a somewhat singular chance, that her determination to end this waiting was taken on the day when Camilla paid her visit to Norbert and induced him to promise that he would return to Idlesse. On that day Mrs. Treherne's patience had given way: she found herself inexpressibly irritated by the sight of Hastings' devotion, which even to her perception had something of a genuine air, and his unconscious complacency. She was unable to understand her own hesitation. Surely what she desired above all things was to strike a blow which this man would be forced to feel, who had never felt anything else which it was in her power to

inflict. Why, then, had she waited? There was no reason for delay. What was to be done should be done promptly. She said these things to herself, with a sudden, instinctive realization that what is not done promptly, in this strange life where we walk in thick mist, seeing not so much as an inch of the way before us, may, by some wholly unforeseen chance, never be done at all. So she resolved to delay no longer; and then, according to a very common fashion of events, something occurred which gave fresh force to this resolve.

It was on its face a very simple occurrence. Only a call from Father Thorne, who came late in the afternoon and found Irma just returned from a drive. Even his eye was struck by the girl's beauty, as, still wearing her outdoor costume, she came across the rich, dim drawing-room toward him, with the sunset glow falling upon her through the western window by which he stood. Of late she had bloomed into a radiancy of loveliness to be compared only to that of some brilliant, delicate flower. The priest looked at her with an admiration not unmixed with sadness. What a beautiful creature she was, — as beautiful in nature as in person, — and formed for all high and noble purposes! How would those purposes be fulfilled, and what would be the result of the engagement into which she had entered, and which was at present pouring such a flood of that rare sunshine of the heart called happiness into her life?

The sight of this happiness was in a measure pathetic to the man who, both from his age and his calling, knew how little it was likely to endure. Yet he was not one of those who distrusted Hastings and

foresaw only unhappiness for Irma in her association with him. On the contrary, from the first moment they had met at Argyle a singular mutual liking had developed between the priest and the man of the world. Intellectually they had so much in common that their points of difference were almost lost sight of; and when now and then these points were touched, the priest, who had been in his time a man of the world in a sense far wider and deeper than that in which the term is usually employed, understood the position and the limitations of the other as no ordinary ecclesiastic could have understood them. Moreover, besides experience, he possessed the insight of something closely approaching to genius; and when the two discussed those problems of thought and conduct which agitate the modern world, it was with rare dispassionateness and a sense of keen intellectual pleasure on the part of each.

Soon they drifted into an intimacy which had for its basis that sympathy which is the most enduring basis for any human friendship. And this sympathy on the part of Father Thorne was not wholly intellectual. The priestly sense in him recognized certain moral qualities in Hastings which he liked and admired, and in which he perceived possibilities of spiritual development hardly to be looked for in a man who, if not a materialist in belief, was naturally steeped to the lips in what may be called the materialism of life. So it had to come to pass that, somewhat to her surprise, Irma found, if not formal approval of her engagement, at least a comprehension and hopefulness on the part of the priest which greatly comforted her.

"It is much to be regretted that Mr. Hastings is not a Catholic," he had said when she announced her engagement; "but he has a mind open to conviction and free from prejudice, and where that is the case there is everything to hope. If he has at present no faith — or at least nothing which deserves to be called faith, — it is owing to the fact that its claims have never been presented to him in a manner to obtain his intellectual assent. But he wisely refrains from dogmatizing on subjects of which he is ignorant; and when an unanswerable argument is presented to him he has sense enough to perceive and candor to acknowledge that it *is* unanswerable. As for the worldliness on which you say that your friends lay so much stress, it is not, I think, of an extreme type. No man can know the world as this man knows it, without becoming cynical and to some degree sceptical of higher things. But cynicism and scepticism have not with him, as with many men, withered the possibility of these higher things in his own nature. Unless I am greatly mistaken, he possesses many admirable qualities, as well as many attractive ones; and I do not believe that he is mercenary."

At the last words Irma's eyes had shone upon the speaker like stars.

"I have not thought it worth while to tell you that the charge of mercenary intention is that which is particularly made against him," she said; "because I knew that you would anticipate it — and I give it no heed."

"Of course I anticipated it," the priest replied; "but I do not believe that Mr. Hastings has sought you for your fortune. Perhaps you may be able to test —" He broke off, and then continued hastily:

"In short, my child, consult God and your own heart with regard to this matter rather than your friends. And be sure that you have the benefit of my poor prayers that you may be rightly guided in a choice so important. Humanly speaking, there is nothing in life more important; for it is marriage which makes or mars the lives of most men and women."

It was with a heart greatly lightened that Irma went away from this interview; and it may readily be judged whether the friendship which had from the first existed between herself and Father Thorne was strengthened and deepened by his kind sympathy and wise comprehension. But all this had been some time before the afternoon when she came to meet him in her drawing-room.

"How charming of you not to have come a few minutes earlier!" she laughed, when they shook hands; "for in that case I should have missed you."

"And I should have been very sorry," he replied, "since I have a special reason for intruding on you at this rather inconvenient hour."

"Can any hour be inconvenient for receiving a friend? And this hour I consider a particularly convenient one, since I may hope to persuade you to dine with us."

"That is impossible, much as I should like to do so. I left a man waiting for me, — and indeed it is at his solicitation that I am here. I have come to propose an act of charity to you."

"That is very good of you," said Irma, with the utmost sincerity. "I owe you thanks for many things, but for nothing more than giving me the great pleasure of relieving distress. What is it now?"

Instead of answering immediately, Father Thorne regarded her with an expression of hesitation and doubt. One would have said that he feared to speak, and yet never was invitation to do so more unmistakable than in the eyes which met his own.

"Do you remember," he said at length, "an old man whom you once spoke with at the church door? His name was Wilkins."

"I remember him very well," Irma answered with evident interest. "I did not know his name at that time, but I made some inquiries and learned who he was. He had a child with him."

"Yes," said the priest. "It is about that child I have come. I believe you spoke to her of visiting Argyle."

"I asked her if she would not like to do so," Irma replied. "But the old man seemed offended by the invitation, and his manner was so singular that I did not press it."

"I can explain the cause of his singular manner," said Father Thorne. "Before the meeting at the church he had called here to see you, and was told that you refused, in the most positive terms, to see him."

"But it is a great mistake, — no such thing ever occurred! I never heard of Mr. Wilkins until after our meeting at the church."

"I felt sure that there was a mistake," said the priest, quietly, "and I told him so. But you can understand that, believing you had refused to see him, he was not prepared to receive your kindness in the spirit with which under other circumstances he would have received it."

"What I cannot understand," said Irma, "is how such a mistake occurred. Why should he have

thought that I would refuse to see him? Who could have told him such a thing?"

"He says that he was told so by Mrs. Treherne."

"By Mrs. Treherne!" the girl repeated. She was about to say "Impossible!" But something suddenly stopped her, — some instinct which told her that it *was* possible. "Mrs. Treherne took a great liberty if she ventured to answer for me in such a manner," she said; "but no doubt she fancied it a matter of no importance."

Father Thorne, who felt thoroughly convinced that Mrs. Treherne was very far from fancying anything of the kind, did not reply to this. He merely said:

"I am glad to be assured that I was right in believing that you never heard of Mr. Wilkins' visit. I told him I was confident there had been a mistake."

"And what was the object of his visit?" Irma asked.

"I think," answered the priest, "that I will leave Mr. Wilkins to tell you the object he had in desiring to see you. At present I have come, by his request, to say that the child is ill, and that she frets for that visit to Argyle which you suggested. He wishes to know if he may bring her to visit the place in case she is able to come. The last is doubtful, I fear."

"I am very sorry that he thought it necessary to ask permission," Irma replied. "And I am more sorry that the child should have fretted for a pleasure so entirely within her reach. I will go to see her and bring her here myself, if you will tell me where to find her."

There was another brief, and to Irma inexplicable, pause before the priest replied. It was plain that he

hesitated — that he opened his lips to speak, then reconsidered and closed them again — before he finally said:

"I can perceive no reason why you should not go to see the child. Mr. Wilkins is living in the village of Woodburn, in a house which is one of the first as you enter the village from the direction of the church."

"I remember that he told me he was living in the country for the sake of the child's health," said Irma. "I am sorry that I have not made an effort sooner to do something for her. I should have done so but for — well, for reasons which seem very small when one thinks of a sick, lonely child fretting for anything so easily attainable as a visit to Argyle."

"I knew that she would not need to fret long after you heard of her desire," said Father Thorne, with a very kindly look in his eyes. "Go, then, and do this act of charity, leaving its results and consequences with God. I am sure that whatever they are they will not harm *you*."

The unconscious gravity of his tone struck Irma with surprise. It seemed the simplest thing imaginable, this question of a charitable visit and a little kindness; yet Father Thorne spoke of it as of something which might be fraught with serious consequences. It was his tone which made her suddenly remember that Hastings had advised her to have nothing to do with either Wilkins or the child. Had she not also promised him that she would regard his advice? This recollection flashing upon her made her extend her hand as if to stop the priest, who after his last words rose to his feet.

"One moment, Father!" she said quickly. "There seems to be something connected with Mr. Wilkins which I do not understand. After meeting him, I asked a few questions of Mr. Hastings; and I was told that he had in some way given trouble to the executors of Mr. Darracote, and that it was best that I should have nothing to do with him. It did not seem a matter which concerned me at all; so I promised to regard the wishes of those who knew more than I did. But in going now to pay this visit, and in bringing the child to Argyle, I shall disregard these wishes. Will you tell me if it is right for me to do so? I ask you because I have no doubt that you know what is the matter at issue between Mr. Wilkins and the representatives of Mr. Darracote, and you can therefore advise me."

"I can easily advise you so far," said Father Thorne, with no trace of hesitation in his manner now. "What you call the matter at issue between Mr. Wilkins and the executors of the late Mr. Darracote is purely a question of fact, which neither your conduct nor that of any one else can alter in the least. If you wish to know all that there is to know regarding it, I have no doubt Mr. Wilkins will tell you everything; but in not telling you myself I am respecting his wishes. I assure you, however, that there is no reason why you should not go to see this child, nor why you should not bring her here if you wish to do so."

"Thank you!" said Irma, gratefully. "That assurance is all I want. For the rest I have no curiosity, and shall certainly ask Mr. Wilkins no questions."

IV

IT was when they chanced to be alone together for a few minutes before dinner, that Irma, looking at Mrs. Treherne, said quietly:

"Will you tell me what you know of a man called Peter Wilkins, and why you told him that I refused to see him?"

Mrs. Treherne fairly gasped with astonishment; and although her power of self-control was generally equal to any demand, her countenance for once betrayed her. The confusion of detected guilt was plainly stamped upon it.

"What do *you* know of Peter Wilkins?" she asked. "Where have you seen him?"

"I do not think that matters at all," Irma replied. "What matters is, that I shall know why you assumed the right to speak for me and to say that I refused to see him."

"I thought that I was sparing you annoyance," Mrs. Treherne answered, regaining her composure. "I knew that he had greatly annoyed Uncle Darracote, and therefore I imagined that by sending him away I was doing you a service."

"Even in that case you should not have told him that *I* refused to see him. It would have been sufficient to send him away on your own authority."

"He would not have heeded me. *I* have not inherited the Darracote fortune."

"No," returned the calm young voice. "And since with the fortune go the responsibilities attached

to it, it is for me to judge of them. You should have given me the opportunity of deciding whether or not I would see this man."

"It does not appear to have mattered very much that I did not give you the opportunity," Mrs. Treherne said sharply, "since you have apparently seen him — and heard his story, I presume."

Irma looked at the speaker for a moment in silence. Difficult as it was for her to suspect any one, an instinct told her that Mrs. Treherne not only knew the story in question, but feared very much that she had heard it; so that it was impossible to believe that her motive in dismissing Peter Wilkins with a falsehood had been what she alleged. Something like a chill of apprehension touched the girl. What was this story which evidently concerned her, and yet which she alone did not know? Should she make this woman tell her what it was? A word leading her to suppose the knowledge already acquired, would do so. There was an instant's brief temptation, and then a proud sense of honor, a proud recollection of a promise given, put the temptation aside. For had not Hastings asked, "*Will you trust me?*" and had not she answered, "*Whatever I promise I fulfil*"? It was true that nothing had been said of listening to Peter Wilkins' story, but surely that was included in the request that she would have nothing to do with him. Urged by charity, she was about to disregard this request in one particular, but all the more would she be careful not to disregard it in the other.

"I have seen Mr. Wilkins," she replied gravely; "that is, I have met him by an accident. But I have

heard no story. I have only learned that he has a grandchild who is ill."

"A grandchild!" interrupted Mrs. Treherne, in a startled tone. "Did he tell you that it was his grandchild?"

"I believe so — but what difference does it make? Whoever the child may be, she is a poor, sickly little creature, and I asked her if she would not like to see Argyle —"

"You asked her!" Mrs. Treherne raised herself in her chair with a look of consternation. "Where did you see her?"

Irma lifted her eyebrows slightly. It began to seem as if it were she who was being held to account.

"I met her," she answered, "at the church door; and her appearance struck me so much — for she seemed sad as well as sickly — that I asked her if she would not like to visit Argyle. Now it seems that she is ill, and that she remembers the suggestion and frets to come here."

"Good Heavens!" exclaimed Mrs. Treherne. She fell back in her chair. "You are more foolish than I could have imagined possible. Does Gerard Hastings know of this?"

"Mr. Hastings has not been here since I told Father Thorne an hour ago that I would go to see the child," Irma replied coldly.

"Oh — Father Thorne!" said Mrs. Treherne. The introduction of this name seemed for a moment to strike her dumb. She lay in her deep, luxurious seat, staring at Irma with the expression of one who is trying to solve a problem. "What has the priest to do with it?" she finally asked, as if of herself.

"He has nothing to do with it, further than that he brought me a message from Mr. Wilkins," Irma answered. "But he agrees with me that to bring the child to Argyle, if she is able to come, will be a simple act of kindness and charity."

"A simple act of kindness and charity!" Mrs. Treherne repeated. Then she suddenly threw back her head and burst into a peal of laughter, — a peal which sounded hysterical as it rang through the rooms and out into the hall, where it astonished Camilla, who was descending the staircase, and the butler, who was in the act of opening the dining-room door preparatory to announcing dinner. "You are to be congratulated on the subject you have found for your charity," she said presently, recovering her gravity as suddenly as she had lost it. "I doubt if anything more absurd was ever conceived in melodrama. But here comes Miss Vincent, who looks very much surprised — I suppose at my amusement."

"There is certainly reason for her surprise," said Irma, in a tone which made Camilla's eyes open a little wider.

At this point dinner was announced, and the conversation ended; nor was it resumed afterward. Mrs. Treherne had heard all that she wished to know, all that was necessary to quicken intention into action; and when she laid her head on her pillow that night it was with the firm resolve to see and speak with Hastings without further delay.

In this manner it came to pass that, after Irma had driven away the next morning on her errand of

charity, Mrs. Treherne ordered a small pony carriage and, with only the attendance of a diminutive groom, also drove away.

Her destination was very near at hand; for although she was aware that Hastings had not been staying at his cottage for several days, she also knew that he was likely to return to it at any time, and hence it was worth while to look for him there in the first place. He had in fact returned that morning, on account of Norbert's letter making an appointment to resume work on the picture of himself and his dogs.

The artist, according to his appointment, arrived punctually, and after a brief conversation — very stiff on his side and very easy on that, of Hastings — went to the painting-room. Somewhat to his surprise, he found the picture, which he had not seen for a fortnight, much better than he had thought it; and, distasteful as the subject was, interest and pride in the work *as* work revived in him, and he was painting with great energy, facility, and absorption, when a sound of wheels grating on the drive before the door of the cottage was followed by the entrance of an apologetic servant.

"What is the meaning of this?" asked Hastings. "Have n't I told you that I am on no account to be disturbed when I am with Mr. Norbert?"

"Yes, sir," the man made haste to answer. "But it is a lady, and she insisted that I should tell you that she wishes to see you."

"A lady! What is her name?"

"She gave no name, sir," the servant — who was a new one — replied. "She is driving herself in a

pony trap, and she told me to say that she would not detain you long."

Hastings rose, with an irritated expression.

"No doubt it is one of my neighbors who has dropped in with an invitation or request of some kind," he said. "A great nuisance, but it would be an unpardonable offence to refuse to see her. I am sorry that your work should be interrupted, Mr. Norbert; but perhaps you can make shift with Gelert until I return."

"Oh, yes!" Norbert replied, glancing at the handsome dog, that pricked up his ears at the sound of his name; "I can work on him very well."

Notwithstanding this assertion, however, he laid down his palette as soon as the door closed behind Hastings, and stood with his hands thrust into his pockets, frowning deeply. The attitude was one of meditation; and, as a matter of fact, he was meditating on the very unpleasant position in which he found himself. He had promised Camilla that he would return here as a spy, — he did not for an instant shirk the use of the plain term, — and that he would lose no opportunity to discover anything about Hastings which might tend to discredit him in Irma's eyes. After he had given this promise, and after Miss Vincent's compelling presence was removed, there is no doubt that he felt uncomfortable and wished himself relieved of his engagement; but he had derived consolation from the thought that although he would certainly suffer in his own esteem by returning to Idlesse under such circumstances, it was extremely uulikely that any opportunity for detective work would be offered him, or that he would

be able to use it if it were offered. He would go, since he had promised to do so, and since there did truly seem something contemptible in not being able to accept defeat with a better grace; but as for expecting to discover anything — Miss Vincent was absurd alike in her suspicions and her hopes, and fancied that people lived the plots of plays and operas in real life! The probabilities were that there was nothing to discover of the kind she imagined; but if there were, he felt thoroughly assured that no chance of such discovery would come his way.

And now — had it not possibly come? Of course this visitor might be, as Hastings said, some lady of the neighborhood merely dropping in to give an informal invitation; but, on the other hand, might she not be an altogether different person? At all events, it was certainly incumbent upon one who had assumed the rôle of detective to satisfy himself on the point. What could he say to Camilla if he failed to do even so much as this? To step into the next room, which had windows to the front, and glance out at the occupant of the pony trap, was very easily to be done, and might pass as no more than the gratification of a curiosity with which it is well known that many people are greatly afflicted. And yet, easily as it was to be done, and harmless, although inexcusably ill-bred, as it might appear, it is difficult to describe the reluctance of the unhappy amateur in detective work to do it. Every instinct of gentlemanhood within him revolted, even while something else — those passions of the natural man upon which Camilla had so skilfully played — impelled him to fulfil the reason of his being where he was.

The end of his meditation startled Gelert, who was watching him. With an oath, to which the dog responded by a low growl of disapproval, he crossed the room in which he stood — the original use of which was that of a smoking and billiard room — to a door which opened into a drawing-room at the front. If this door were locked, as he had once or twice known it to be, that would end the matter; he would have no means of discovering who the caller was, and might rest satisfied in ignorance. But when did chance ever assist him who leaves to chance the decision of some question in which honor or ethics is involved? The door yielded to his touch; he pushed aside an Oriental curtain on the other side, and a dozen steps carried him across the room to one of the windows opening on the veranda beyond, where, shielded from observation by blinds and curtains, he saw clearly the pony carriage and its occupant, as well as Hastings, who stood beside it.

So it was Mrs. Treherne, after all! By the sense of startled surprise which seized him, he knew how little he had really expected this proof that Camilla's suspicions possessed at least some degree of foundation. And it was probably natural that the sight of this woman, whom he had never liked, and who was charged with scheming against Irma together with the man who stood beside her, should have had the effect of immediately banishing all his scruples. So far from hesitating any longer over this manner of acquiring information, he was filled with a passionate desire to acquire more by any means whatever. He was on fire to know what those two were saying to each other, unmindful of the fact that it could be nothing

of importance, since the ears of a servant were close behind them. "If I could but hear!" he was saying to himself with an ardor which would have satisfied Camilla, when suddenly his heart gave a leap — Hastings extended his hand, Mrs. Treherne descended from the carriage, and, side by side, they mounted the veranda steps.

The rest was like a dream to Norbert. He seemed to himself to be acting under some other volition than his own as he retreated rapidly across the apartment, drew the portière carefully over the door by which he had entered, and, from the side of the painting-room, arranged the door itself slightly ajar. The next moment he heard steps and voices. Hastings and Mrs. Treherne were entering the drawing-room.

V

"I MUST think," said Hastings, coldly, "that you are giving yourself unnecessary trouble."

Mrs. Treherne looked at him with a mocking smile.

"I have no doubt you think so; and, still more, that I am giving you unnecessary annoyance," she rejoined. "But you are mistaken on both points. The trouble and the annoyance are distinctly necessary. Otherwise, believe me, I should not be here — Thanks! yes, I will sit down."

She sank into the seat which he offered, and then again looked up at him, as he remained standing before her.

"You had better sit down also," she said. "I comprehend perfectly that you wish to intimate to

me that my visit should be short. I have not the least intention of prolonging it a moment beyond what is necessary. This being understood, you can permit yourself to take a chair. We shall talk better so."

Her tone was cool, almost insolent. It indicated to Hastings that the time had come when all pretences were to be swept away between them. In her glance, also, he read something quite new which told him that the situation was entirely changed. She had never been able heretofore to touch him in any effective manner, but she believed herself able to do so now. Mingled with his disdain, he was conscious of a little curiosity. He bowed and answered:

"In that case I will sit down."

He drew forward a chair and seated himself immediately before her. Their eyes met; and if there was something new to be perceived in hers, in his, on the contrary, she recognized only a long familiar indifference and contempt.

"I am ready," he said, "to hear what it is you have kindly called to tell me."

"I have called to tell you something which I think you will admit to be rather important," she replied. "You are engaged to marry Irma Darracote; and while of course I am convinced of your disinterestedness —"

"Pardon me," he interrupted, "but can we not take your opinion and your sarcasm for granted, and come to the important point — if it exists?"

Her eyes flashed. No matter how much she might resolve not to allow herself to become irritated, the fact remained that this man possessed a power of

irritating her which made the preservation of outward composure very difficult.

"Kindly suffer me to finish my sentence," she said. "I was about to add that, notwithstanding your disinterestedness and probable indifference to the fact that Irma possesses the Darracote fortune, you will admit that it is a very important matter to her, and therefore also to you, that this possession is seriously threatened."

"I readily admit it," he answered. "Whatever concerns either her interest or her happiness — the two things are entirely separable in her case — is of very great importance to me. But do you really suppose that I am not aware that there exists a possible claimant of the Darracote fortune? I have known it for some time."

"Ah! you have seen Peter Wilkins, then?"

"I have not had that pleasure; but I have seen Mr. Kirby, and have heard from him the history of a claim which Mr. Darracote refused to acknowledge up to the time of his death. We decided — Mr. Kirby and myself — that there was no need to trouble Miss Darracote with any knowledge of the matter. It would only disturb her, and the claim is entirely unsupported by proof."

Leaning back in her chair, Mrs. Treherne regarded the speaker with what was clearly a smile of triumph.

"To believe what one wishes to believe, or what is clearly to one's interest to believe, is tempting," she said, "but not always safe. You are mistaken in thinking that the claim is entirely unsupported by proof. There exists sufficient proof — for it convinced Mr. Darracote on his death-bed."

"How do you know that?"

"You shall hear. It is something of a story, so I will begin at the beginning — at the night Mr. Darracote died, and at the moment when you and I were together in the drawing-room and Peter Wilkins arrived. You probably remember that you saw him alone, and on your own responsibility took him to Mr. Darracote's chamber — "

"So far from that," Hastings interrupted, "Mr. Darracote himself sent for him, as I think *you* must remember, since you came into the hall and spoke to me after he had gone upstairs."

"It is a detail of small importance. The essential fact is that but for you Mr. Darracote would never have known of his presence in the house. I do remember suggesting that your action had not been prudent, and you were very kind, very courteous, and went away quite abruptly — to smoke, I think you said."

"Your recollection is correct. I went away to smoke, and when I re-entered the house Mr. Darracote was dead."

"Yes," — she spoke in a tone of quiet reminiscence. "He died asking for you, and expressing surprise that you had left him. It was certainly unfortunate that you should have had a desire to smoke just then. Your absence not only pained Uncle Darracote, but threw a great responsibility upon me."

Hastings started, as she had intended that he should.

"May I ask what possible responsibility my absence threw upon you?"

"It will be better to go on with the story in regular order, perhaps," Mrs. Treherne returned composedly.

"Well, you went away to smoke, but I was very anxious about the effect of Mr. Wilkins' visit, because the doctor had been so emphatic in forbidding any excitement for Uncle Darracote. So I stayed where you left me; and presently Mr. Wilkins came down, and also Jasper, who said that he had orders to go for Mr. Kirby at once. Then I went upstairs, fearing the result of so much excitement on a person so ill —"

"You should have called me," said Hastings, sternly. "You knew perfectly well that I was on the lawn."

"How did I know? You left me in the most abrupt manner possible. You did not consult me, and so —"

"And so you ignored me. I perfectly comprehend the retaliation. It is not necessary to dwell upon it further. Let us come to facts. All this I know. I thought that you had something to tell me which I did not know."

What a gleam it was which shot from her eyes, narrowed and half-veiled by their drooping lids!

"You are right," she said. "I have certainly something to tell you which you do not know. I went upstairs, where, as I feared, I found Uncle Darracote in a state of intense excitement. He wanted you, and insisted that the nurse should go and send for you. She had barely gone when he told me to raise him up in the bed and bring him writing materials. I was frightened and tried to prevent his exerting himself; but you know how peremptory he could be. He insisted and I did as he ordered. His strength was wonderful; for with his own hand — oh,

you may look incredulous, but it is so! — he wrote *this*."

She opened a silken bag which hung on her arm, and drew out a paper which she handed to Hastings.

For the space of a minute there was silence in the room; then Hastings looked up from the paper, which he had opened and read. He was a little pale, but his composure was unshaken.

"This is a copy," he said. "Where is the original?"

Mrs. Treherne laughed. It would have been difficult to express in words anything so insulting as that laugh.

"Do you think that I would bring the original here? It is quite safe; and, if you desire me to do so, I can put it in Mr. Kirby's hands to-morrow."

"Why did you not put it into his hands immediately?"

"Because I saw no possible interest of my own to be gained by doing so, whereas there was a possibility that, by holding it in reserve, I might some day serve my interest very much."

"Are you aware that to suppress a will is a criminal offence?"

"I did not take the question of legality into consideration. Accident simply placed a certain power in my hands, and I had not the least scruple in using it; especially after I found that, out of his great wealth, Mr. Darracote had so poorly provided for me. I determined then that I would provide for myself. But I waited; I have never found that anything is gained by haste. I wished to learn what kind of person the new heiress might be, in order to decide

whether or not to offer the paper to her. Well, you know what I found: a girl ignorant of life, brought up by a dreamer of vague socialist dreams, who, had she known of this, would have rushed to cast her fortune to the waif who may or may not be the child of the actress who died in Australia. There remained to wait a little longer and see whom she would marry. From the first I had little doubt that it would be yourself."

"And you were kind enough to believe that, in case it were myself, you would have no difficulty in disposing of your document?"

"From my knowledge of you," she returned, "I believed that you would perceive clearly that the only sensible thing to do is to destroy a paper which was written by a man so near death that he was incapable of judging correctly, and which recognizes a claim that in health he had always refused to recognize."

"You overlook the point that his recognition was due to the fact that he had received fresh proof of the validity of the claim."

Mrs. Treherne waved her hand, as if dismissing that consideration with supreme indifference.

"He was not in a condition to judge of anything," she repeated. "No doubt Wilkins worked upon his feelings, for it is to be supposed that he possibly had some, although I never discovered their existence. But this is an idle discussion. How does it matter whether or not he had reason for changing the disposition of his fortune? The one important point is that this paper *does* change it, and that if it is produced Irma Darracote is no longer a rich woman."

"I am no lawyer," replied Hastings, quietly; "but I doubt if that is so certain as you think. I do not believe that this paper has any legal value as a will. It is unwitnessed, and it would be produced under circumstances which would be considered suspicious, to say the least."

Mrs. Treherne laughed a little.

"Have no fears on that point," she said. "I have asked questions — discreetly, of course — of various lawyers. I find that this document, although informal, has a distinct legal value, as it affords important evidence that Mr. Darracote accepted the proof that the child in the hands of Peter Wilkins is his grandchild. It would help very materially in a suit to set aside the will and give the estate to the direct heir, — of so much you may be sure. But this legal value of the paper is really of minor importance. You know whether or not I am right in saying that if Irma once learns of its existence, no lawsuit will be necessary to establish the claim of the new heiress. The whole thing will for her assume a moral aspect, and nothing could prevent her from giving up the estate, — not even your influence."

There was a pause as the clear, emphatic tones ceased. Then Hastings rose and walked across the room.

No one could know better than himself that Mrs. Treherne was right in her opinion. If, as he had warned Mr. Kirby, some such action was to be expected of Irma if she learned the possible relationship of the child to Mr. Darracote, how much more certain was it when she saw this paper! The signatures of a hundred witnesses could not make that will more

valid in her eyes than it would be as it stood, — merely the pathetic expression of a dying man's last wishes.

But should Irma be permitted to do herself such great injury? This was the question which followed. There was a strong probability that Mr. Darracote, moved, no doubt, by consciousness of the near approach of death, had at the last accepted with too much credulity proof which was by no means convincing. Hastings felt assured that, if he were living, he would be the first to advise delay until certainty could be secured. In the legal sense, this paper was not a will. If the two documents were placed side by side, any court would sustain the will under which Irma inherited the property. The document which the dying man had scrawled with such infinite difficulty had value only as evidence that he accepted the proof Peter Wilkins brought him; but it would not give the fortune to the claimant further than, by sustaining her claim as the direct heir, — which claim was still to be proved, — it might indirectly lead to the setting aside of the regularly executed will.

Since this was the case, and since it had not been produced immediately after Mr. Darracote's death and before Irma had entered upon possession of her inheritance, Hastings said to himself that injustice rather than justice would be the result of producing it now. Mrs. Treherne not only judged correctly in foretelling the probable action of the girl whose keen moral sense he knew so well, but she was also right in asserting that even his influence would be powerless to prevent such action. What, then, remained to be done? To see Irma strip herself of her fortune

to enrich a possible impostor — innocent, but still an impostor — or to buy this woman's silence and her dishonorable secret, in order that he might use the last as his judgment dictated and the final sifting of proof rendered advisable?

It was a terrible dilemma. He was not only conscious that by accepting the last alternative he himself would be technically guilty of a dishonorable action, but nothing could have been more bitter to him than the necessity of gratifying the cupidity and rewarding the dishonesty of one whom he so heartily despised. With an intense sense of rage and disgust, he told himself that to descend to her level by coming to terms with her was impossible. And yet — Irma! Was he not bound to shield her even at a sacrifice of his pride? He did not say, of his honor, because he did not think that he would sacrifice his honor by taking the power to do justice into his own hands. For let it be clearly stated that his intention was fixed to do exact justice to Mr. Darracote's grandchild, if grandchild she proved to be. But as Mr. Darracote himself had said, he would run no risk of rewarding imposture, and of allowing Irma to throw away a fortune, of which he at least recognized the value, at the dictates of an overstrained conscientiousness.

Mrs. Treherne, who had been watching his back with not a little anxiety in her gaze, as he stood at some distance from her, looking out of a window, drew an audible sigh of relief as he turned around. The first sight of his face told her that she had succeeded, although she almost shrank before its look of contempt. But when he spoke it was at once apparent that he was still holding himself well in hand.

"You have traded successfully upon your knowledge that I will not have Miss Darracote disturbed in her peace and troubled in her conscience by this story," he said. "We will, therefore, come to business, if you please. What is your price for the paper of which we have been talking?"

She threw her head back and gazed at him with eyes which blazed defiance of his scorn.

"My price," she said, "is the legacy I should have had, — one equal to your own. It is five hundred thousand dollars."

"Are you mad?" he asked.

"No, I am not mad," she returned. "I am entirely sane, and you will find that I am also very determined. As soon as that paper came into my hands I said to myself that it should serve to give me the independence of fortune which I had never had. The Darracote estate is valued, I think, at seven or eight millions. Half a million is, therefore, a moderate price for securing such a fortune to you."

"You are overreaching yourself," said Hastings, very coldly. "In the first place, the Darracote fortune is not mine — "

"It will be yours; and Irma will do whatever you direct, if you are careful not to array her absurd scruples against you. She has no love for me, but at a suggestion from you, to the effect that I have not been properly provided for, she will sign away half a million as lightly as I would give a cheque in payment for a bonnet. That is the result of her charming ignorance of the value of money."

"In the second place," Hastings went on, without noticing the interruption, "you do *not* secure the

fortune either to her or to me by giving up this paper. As you have discovered, it has no standing as a will; and if it were destroyed to-morrow the grandchild of Mr. Darracote, by proving that she is the grandchild, might be declared the heiress of his estate. That is entirely possible, and in such a case I should have the pleasure of paying you half a million for nothing."

"You are perfectly aware that the child of whom you talk has no money and no friends to fight her case — if she has one."

"There, again, you are mistaken. Such a case never fails to find those who will take it up, if only as a matter of speculation. I chance to know that a man is at present in Australia collecting evidence with regard to it."

"And if he finds proof that she is really Mr. Darracote's grandchild?"

"Then Miss Darracote will be advised to compromise. The fortune, as you have mentioned, is large enough to divide."

Mrs. Treherne rose to her feet.

"I see that you have made your plans," she said; "and prepared, as you imagine, for all emergencies, even to the point of deciding to give up half the fortune, if necessary. But you have not reckoned with *me*, Gerard Hastings; and reckon with me you shall! I have an old and a long score to settle with you, and we will settle it now. Either agree to pay my price for this paper or understand that you will have no chance to retain any of the fortune; for I shall take the paper to Irma as soon as I return to Argyle. Since she will probably have the real heiress

there, — as an interesting object of charity, — the scene will not be without its dramatic aspects. You can come and witness it if you like."

Again there was a brief pause. Then Hastings said sternly:

"What do you mean by talking of 'the real heiress there' — at Argyle?"

"I mean exactly what I say," Mrs. Treherne answered. "By some means — through the officiousness of the priest, I believe — Irma has heard of her, even met her, and has gone to-day to bring her to visit Argyle, — all as a work of charity. It could not possibly have been better arranged on the stage. Fancy the scene when I enter with my paper, — 'Behold your cousin, the true heiress of the wealth you have found so burdensome! How delightful that you can lay it down, return to Bohemia, and perhaps at last find consolation with your artist — '"

"It is unfortunate," said Hastings, calmly, "that certain inherited and frequently misplaced instincts of chivalry prevent men from dealing with women like you as they deserve to be dealt with."

She lifted her shoulders, bitter mockery in the gesture as in her glance and tone.

"I am well aware that you would like to strangle me," she said; "and there have been cases on record where those instincts of chivalry of which you speak have not prevented something of the kind. But this is idle talk, and I wish to leave. Decide at once — will you pay my price, or shall I go to Irma?"

Hastings drew his breath hard, but only for an instant.

"I will pay your price!" he said.

VI

THE village of Woodburn, where Father Thorne had told Irma that she would find Peter Wilkins and his charge, was one of those places sufficiently numerous in the neighborhood of expanding cities which have undergone changes so great as practically to amount to transformation. Originally a pretty, quiet country hamlet, it had become what some of its inhabitants proudly called "a manufacturing suburb" of the city, which had stretched out one hand, as it were, and drawn it forever away from dreamy quietness and leafy beauty to turmoil and ugliness. This turmoil of great works, where the noise of machinery, the throbbing of engines, sounded from morning to night, and this ugliness of long lines of houses, depressingly and sordidly alike, had, however, spared a little of the old Woodburn. A small stream divided the village, and on the side where railroad and trolley tracks did not enter, there remained a few broad, tree-shaded streets, and houses of the old type, — square, comfortable, substantial, and embowered in shade. This was the side nearest the church; and when Irma reached it she bade her coachman drive slowly, and her footman get down and inquire for the cottage of Mr. Wilkins.

It was not difficult to find. Very near the edge of the village, and consequently most remote from its manufacturing portion, the man paused at the gate of one of the old-fashioned houses, and, when the carriage drew up, reported that he was informed Mr.

Wilkins lived here. For whom did Miss Darracote wish that he should ask?

Miss Darracote replied that she would herself go in and make her inquiries. A moment later she was walking up a short, box-bordered path to the door of the house. At her ring it opened quickly, and an elderly woman with a pleasant, homely face stood before her.

"Good-morning!" said the young lady, with her air of charming courtesy. "I am told that Mr. Wilkins lives here."

"He's boarding here," the woman answered, her eyes wandering from the graceful figure to the carriage at the gate and then back again. "But he's not in at present. He mostly goes to the city this time of day."

"I am sorry that he is not at home, but I have not really come to see him," Irma said. "I have come to see a little girl — his grandchild."

"Do you mean Lily Vidal?" the other inquired, with something of surprise in her tone.

"I suppose so," was the reply; "I really do not know her name. All that I know is that she is Mr. Wilkins' grandchild, and — yes — I think I heard him call her Lily."

"It's bound to be Lily Vidal, for there ain't any other Lily here; nor, for the matter of that, any other child," the woman said in an argumentative tone. "But she isn't Mr. Wilkins' grandchild — in fact, I don't believe she's any relation to him at all. He's only her guar*deen*."

"Oh!" said Irma. This was unexpected information; and although it might have seemed that it

was a matter of no importance to her what relation the child bore to the old clerk, she had a curious consciousness that in some manner it was important. A recollection of Mrs. Treherne's manner, of Mrs. Treherne's singular sayings and more singular laughter, came back to her. Her eyes opened with a slightly startled expression on the woman who stood looking at her; but the pause was only momentary. In an instant she recovered herself. "Then I should like to see Lily Vidal, if you please," she said. "I have heard that she is ill."

"She ain't ever what you'd call real well," the woman answered; "and to-day she's a little more ailing than usual, but I don't know as it's anything serious. She's dreadful fretful and mopey, though, and it'll be a good thing for her to have somebody to cheer her up a bit. Walk this way, miss!"

She opened a door on one side of the passage which ran through the house, and introduced Irma into a large, sunny room comfortably furnished in old-fashioned style, with a few modern additions, no doubt provided by Peter Wilkins himself. On one of these — a broad lounge, plentifully strewn with cushions — reclined the child whom Irma had seen at the church door. It struck the girl at once that she was more sallow and more thin than she had been at that time; in fact, there was an aspect of painful attenuation about her; and the hands which were languidly arranging the toilette of a large doll were like claws in their lack of flesh. She looked up as the door opened; and at the words, "Here's a lady come to see you, Lily," a flash of pleasure shone in the pale blue eyes which rested on Irma.

"Oh, it's the lady I told you about, Mrs. Miller," she cried, "who asked me to go to Argyle! You *did* ask me, didn't you?" she continued, directly addressing Irma. "And you meant it, didn't you? Mrs. Miller says you never meant it, — that ladies like you promise things and then forget all about them."

"Now, Lily!" remonstrated Mrs. Miller. "You shouldn't say such things as that. I told you that ladies sometimes made promises and then forgot 'em, as we're all liable to do. So you're Miss Darracote?" she went on, looking at Irma with frank curiosity. "I was wondering who you might be. And I'm sure it's very kind of you to come to see the child, who's set her heart greatly on going to Argyle."

"Mr. Wilkins should not have hesitated to gratify her," said Irma. "I asked her if she did not want to see the place, and I certainly meant what I said. It was an invitation, not a promise."

Lily nodded her head.

"Yes, that's what it was, — an invitation, not a promise," she repeated. "So you see, Mrs. Miller, you made a great mistake; and Wilkie did, too. *He* kept telling me the lady never meant it; but I knew she did."

"And you were right," said Irma, sitting down beside the couch, and smiling into the pinched little face. "You were the only one who did me justice."

"That's because I like you," said Lily, promptly; "and I like you because you are just awfully pretty." She suddenly leaned forward and threw her thin arms around the girl's neck. "Oh, I wish — I *wish* that I could have somebody as pretty as you are with me all the time!" she cried.

Astonished as Irma was, she was even more deeply touched. Her heart melted with tender pity for the child, whose sense of some deep need found expression in that outburst. It was to her ear as pathetic as the clasp of the stick-like arms about her neck. She put her own arms around the small figure, and kissed the mouth, the lips of which felt dry and parched as if with fever.

"You shall have somebody quite as pretty as I am with you, if not all the time, at least very often," she said, trying to speak lightly. "For I will come to see you, and you shall visit me at Argyle. Indeed, that is what I am here for now. Since you would not accept my invitation and go to Argyle yourself, I have come to take you there."

"To take me!" The child's face was a study of mingled amazement and delight. "Do you really mean it? But — but I can't walk except a very little. I'm not strong, you know."

"I know, but you need not walk farther than the gate. My carriage is there. We shall go in that."

"Your carriage!" Lily twisted herself around until, through a window near by, she could see the carriage with its champing horses. At the sight her whole face became irradiated. She sprang up from the couch, tottering a little from weakness as she stood on her feet. "I want my jacket and hat at once!" she cried. "Please, Mrs. Miller, get them for me — quick!"

"Lord bless us! the lady's in no such hurry as that," said Mrs. Miller. "It's her own carriage: it'll wait. And I don't really know as I ought to let her go, Miss," she added apologetically. "Mr.

Wilkins always charges me on no account to let her go anywhere when he 's away. He 's very particular; and since I 'm trusted with her — "

"I understand," Irma said, as she paused. "You are quite right. I will come another time when Mr. Wilkins is at home. Lily will be content to wait, I am sure, since I promise that I will certainly come."

"No!" said Lily, violently. "I 'll not wait. I 'll go now." She frowned at Mrs. Miller and stamped her foot. "You 've got nothing to do with me! I don't mind you unless I want to; and I don't mind Wilkie unless I want to, either! I *will* go, — I 'll get my jacket and hat myself."

She ran across the room and began to pull open a drawer; while Mrs. Miller and Irma looked at each other.

"She 's got such a temper as never was," the former said in a confidential tone. "If she sets her head, it 's just as well to save time and trouble by letting her have her own way at once. That 's what the old gentleman does, so you had better take her."

"I think not," said Irma. "I don't like to assume the responsibility, since Mr. Wilkins objects to her going out. And he might blame you."

"It would n't matter much if he did," Mrs. Miller replied; "but when I tell him she got into one of her tantrums, he 'll know it could n't be helped. If you left her now, she would sob and cry and rage till she made herself sick. That 's how it always is, and so Mr. Wilkins don't never cross her. Besides, I have n't any doubt he 'd like her to go to Argyle. She 's been fretting about it so much, and talking of the pretty lady day in and day out."

"I wish I had known!" said Irma, regretfully. "I would have come for her long ago."

"Oh, better late than never!" was the cheerful rejoinder. "Now I might as well help her put on her things. Though she is such a little spitfire, I'm glad she's to have the pleasure she's wanted so long."

So the jacket was buttoned around the frail little figure, the hat set on the flowing yellow hair above the thin, sallow face; and, leaving a message for Mr. Wilkins to the effect that she would bring Lily back in the afternoon, Irma took the child out to the carriage, and they were soon driving toward Argyle.

Although not without the slightly uneasy feeling of one who has taken in charge a small wild beast, subject to unexpected outbreaks of an alarming description, and with an embarrassing uncertainty as to how such outbreaks if occurring are to be controlled, Irma found herself enjoying the child's intense pleasure in this sudden diversion in her monotonous life. It was the pleasure of one who possesses a nature passionately craving amusement, excitement, beauty, and luxury, — the artistic temperament, in short; or at least one form of that temperament, which knows many variations. With a deep sigh of satisfaction, Lily sank back on the dark-blue cushions of the victoria, and felt the delightful action of the springs, as the horses, stepping up to their noses, moved briskly off.

"Oh, is n't this nice!" she exclaimed. "I like it a great deal better than the trolley, where Wilkie takes me riding. He says that he can't afford carriages; although I have been in a carriage sometimes, but not a carriage like this. Is it far to Argyle, Miss Darracote?"

"No," answered Irma, reassuringly. "You will not have time to be tired. We shall be there very soon."

"I'm sorry!" said the child, with another sigh, this time not of satisfaction. "I am not afraid of being tired. I wish it was far — very far."

"Do you like driving so much?" the girl asked gently. "Then you shall have a long drive before you return home this afternoon. But now we will go immediately to Argyle; for I do not want to run any risk of tiring you, since you are not well, and I have stolen you away from your — from Mr. Wilkins."

"Oh, *he* won't mind!" replied Lily. "He'll be glad for me to go to Argyle. We've talked of it often, and he always promised to take me some day, but he never would agree that the right time had come. And, anyhow, he couldn't have taken me like this!" she added, with another nestling motion into the cushions of the carriage.

When they entered the Argyle gates and the beautiful grounds spread around them, still more when they drew up at the entrance, and, descending, passed into the spacious hall, and thence to a room which seemed to the eager eyes gazing on it for the first time a very temple of things exquisite and luxurious, the child, who had been silent under these multiplying impressions, summed up all that she felt in one cry of admiration and longing:

"Oh, Miss Darracote, I wish I could live always at Argyle!"

A few hours later, worn out with sight-seeing and her own intense interest and excitement therein,

Lily lay sleeping on a couch in Irma's chamber; while Irma herself, seated at a little distance, found her eyes and her thoughts persistently straying from the book open in her hand to the face that was thrown into relief by the deep color of the silken cushions upon which it rested.

Even in sleep, what a pitiful little face it was — so unchildlike in expression, so keen, so eager for all the things of life; yet tired and worn, as if they had been already attained and exhausted! And what the face expressed in sleep, the shrill sharp voice, with its edge of discontent, had been pouring into Irma's ears, as the two went through gardens and greenhouses; and the child's pleasure in seeing had been plainly equalled or surpassed by her longing to possess. Some words of warning which Hastings had uttered occurred to Irma as she perceived this. "Believe me, it does no good to give people glimpses of things which they can never possess," he had remarked. "What has the grandchild of Peter Wilkins to do with Argyle? By showing it to her, you will only make her dissatisfied with her own lot and her own home."

Irma remembered that she had questioned this, drawing upon her personal experience to confute the speaker; but she was now forced to acknowledge that he had been right at least in this case. No doubt there were natures peculiarly subject to the temptations of envy and discontent, — natures like that of this child, consumed with longing for gifts of fortune far beyond their reach, and upon whom the sight of the things for which they longed acted like an evil stimulant. There was no doubt that when

she returned to Woodburn, to Peter Wilkins and Mrs. Miller, Lily Vidal would be many degrees more fretful and hard to manage, because rendered many degrees more discontented by her visit to Argyle.

"I have made a mistake and done harm instead of good," Irma thought, as she watched the child. "She will certainly not be the happier for this experience. Poor little creature! How young she is to be so filled with desire for what Camilla calls 'the champagne of life'! Where does she get it? And who is she anyway? What has this old man Wilkins to do with her, since she is not related to him? And what claim has he upon the Darracote estate? Why did he come to see me, and why did Mrs. Treherne tell a falsehood in order to send him away? Why did she speak of a 'story,' and why did she laugh so strangely? And — and why did Gerard ask me to have nothing to do with this child?"

She sat lost in thought, in the silence of the sunny chamber, her grave, dark eyes fastened upon the child, in whom, or in the mystery surrounding whom, she felt that the answer to all these questions lay. Again a chill of apprehension touched her. What did it mean? What was the story which was concealed, or at least withheld, from her? She suddenly said to herself that she would know. It was her duty to know; for, as she had said to Mrs. Treherne, it was to her alone that, together with the Darracote fortune, had come the responsibilities attached to the same. And should she evade any of those responsibilities, turn aside from any knowledge which might lead to the fulfilment of a duty, however embarrassing or painful such knowledge might be?

She lifted her head a little proudly. They did not know her who fancied such a thing possible. Hastings had meant to shield her from annoyance, — she was sure of that, and grateful for his thoughtfulness. But she would tell him that she had no desire to secure immunity from trouble at the cost of ignoring any claim upon her, or closing her eyes to any human need. Because of her promise, she would not ask Peter Wilkins for his story: Hastings should tell it to her himself; but she would not longer be kept in ignorance. On that point her resolve was firmly taken.

And even while she so thought and so resolved, the whole matter was taken out of her hands. Fate, in the odd guise of a French maid, entered and laid a card before her, saying:

"The gentleman awaits Mademoiselle in the library."

VII

IRMA rose to her feet with an exclamation of pleasure, for the name on the card was that of Norbert. She had entirely forgiven all that he had said to wound and pain her at their last meeting, and her faithful heart desired nothing more than the renewal of their old friendship. Nor did she doubt that he had now come to renew it; to ask her, perhaps, to overlook his rash judgment of one whom she loved; at all events, to express his tardy wishes for her happiness. Calling Margherita, she bade her bring her work and sit with the sleeping child until her return. Then she ran lightly downstairs.

When she entered the library, the sweet kindness and brightness of her face struck Norbert like a blow. He was standing near a window with his back turned to it; so that, the light being full upon Irma as she advanced, he saw not only the cordiality of her welcome, but something more, — something which artist-eye and lover-instinct together divined to be the abiding gladness of one who carried about with her a joy which nothing could touch. For an instant his heart failed him. To shatter this beautiful content, to end this visible happiness, seemed more than he could do. But there followed quickly the reaction of indignation, rendered more fierce by the sight of happiness which rested upon deception. For thought of self seemed swept away from him. So much it is but fair to say. He was absorbed in thought of the girl before him, who was giving the great treasure of herself, of her tender, passionate heart, to one who made a bargain to deceive and betray her. The recollection of that bargain was to Norbert as a consuming fire driving him on. To spare Irma the knowledge of it would be to deliver her over not only to a man who was a mercenary and dishonorable schemer, but also to a position of dishonesty, — of holding what was not justly her own. Would he ever have deserved her friendship and that of her father if he could do this? — if, to spare her suffering, he left her to the sweetness of a happiness which had no more stable foundation than a lie?

And while these reflections were passing through his mind, Irma, coming forward with that light of pleasure on her face, was saying:

"You are just in time to make your peace for your long absence. Another day and it might have been difficult."

Then, as they shook hands and he was forced to emerge from the shadow in which he had been standing, she uttered an exclamation. "Have you been ill?" she asked quickly. "You are looking very badly."

"Am I?" he returned indifferently. "No, I have not been ill — at least not in body. And illness of spirit does not matter."

"But that is what matters, most of all," she said, looking at him with solicitude. "Illness of body is a trifle compared to illness of spirit. Sit down and let us talk. Why have you been unkind and stayed away so long?"

"Because I had no alternative but to stay away," he answered. "How little you understand — or care — what I have suffered, that you can ask such a question!"

"Do you think I have not cared?" she said. "Ah, you do not know! More than I can express has been taken away from my happiness by the thought that it has cost you pain. I have wanted to tell you so, but you would give me no opportunity."

"What earthly good would your telling me so have done?" he cried, with the sharpness of one who is pushed beyond the limits of endurance. "Do you think I don't know that you are sorry, — sorry as you would be if you saw a stray dog in pain, much less a man whom you have held as a friend? But expressions of sympathy don't help anything which one has to bear; and, since I could not trust myself

to come and play a part, — offer congratulations, pretend that I was not badly hurt, — I thought it best to stay away. I have n't come now to talk of myself. What I feel is a matter of no importance. I have come" — he paused a moment, as if choking, then went on almost violently — "to make you suffer — to make you hate me, perhaps, — but, all the same, to fulfil a duty."

These last words, and his expression of countenance as he uttered them, filled Irma with something more than surprise. A horrible fear rushed upon her with sickening force. An instinct clearly told her that this man had indeed come, not to utter selfish complaints, nor to offer conventional good wishes, nor yet to make vague accusations, but to tell her something definite and concrete, which would try her powers, and perhaps her faith, to the utmost. And as she felt this, her soul braced itself to hear him. Her face was pale, but set with a firmness which brought out all the fine clearness of its lines. When she spoke, her voice was very calm.

"I do you the justice to believe that you have no desire to make me suffer," she said. "And certainly I shall not hate you for fulfilling a duty, although I do not perceive how you can have a duty to fulfil toward me. But whatever it is — whatever you have come to say — let me hear it at once."

"Yes, that is best," he assented. "There 's nothing which will make what I have to tell easier for you to hear, so I had better tell it quickly. Only I should like you to believe that I am not thinking of myself in this matter, and that I am sorry — "

She interrupted him with a gesture which was superb in its setting aside of idle futilities.

"As you remarked a moment ago, expressions of sympathy — or sorrow — don't help anything which one has to bear," she said. "And how does it matter whether you are thinking of yourself or not? You have come, it appears, to tell me something. Therefore tell it."

Her tone was peremptory to the point of command, and the eyes under their level brows were equally compelling. Here was no shrinking girl to be pitied and spared, but a woman all in arms to meet and resist what she divined to be an attack upon the honor of the man she loved. Perhaps this attitude of hers helped the man before her in his self-imposed task as nothing else could possibly have done.

"I was only about to add that I am sorry it should fall to me to tell you such a story," he said. "But, briefly, here it is. I went this morning to Mr. Hastings' cottage to work upon the picture I have undertaken to paint for him, and which I am extremely anxious to finish. While he was giving a sitting for his portrait, a servant came in and said that a lady had driven up to the door and wished to speak with him. He went out to see her; and I, remembering some things which I had heard, thought that I would learn who she was. You do not approve of that," — he had caught a quick flash of surprise and scorn in the dark eyes, — "but there were reasons why I felt impelled to gain the knowledge. I went into the next room and glanced through a window. I found that the lady was Mrs. Treherne."

He paused for an instant, but Irma did not speak.

Perhaps she started a little at sound of a name which possibly she had not expected to hear, but otherwise there was no change in her position or the expression of her face. She knew that this was only prefatory, and she waited for what was to come.

"After a minute or two," Norbert went on, "Mrs. Treherne left her carriage, and I saw that, together with Mr. Hastings, she was coming into the house. I returned to the painting-room — which you probably remember is just behind the drawing-room. They came into the last, and I — heard what they said."

There was no mistaking now the expression in the eyes fastened upon him.

"And you *listened?*" the girl asked incredulously.

He threw back his head defiantly.

"Yes, I listened. Is not a man justified in listening to a plot against his life? And this was more — far more. It was a plot against your — "

"Stop!" The word was like a bullet, and as she uttered it Irma rose to her feet, pale, proud, indignant. "I will hear nothing more," she said. "You insult me by thinking that I would receive any information obtained in such a manner. I will not listen to another word."

"Ah, but you must — you shall!" said Norbert.

Her scorn made him reckless of everything except the attaining of his object. He stepped forward and, hardly knowing what he did, caught her wrist. "It is for your own sake. You may think what you please of me, but you shall listen!" he said. And then he hurried on: "Mrs. Treherne had come to tell Mr. Hastings that she holds a

will, made by Mr. Darracote on his death-bed, which gives his property to a child — his grandchild — who is in some way connected with a man named Peter Wilkins. This will she offered to sell to Hastings. He told her that, being informal, it was legally worthless, and that he had known of the child's existence all the time. Then she threatened to bring the paper to you, saying that you would recognize a moral if not a legal obligation in it; and, to prevent her doing this, he made a bargain with her, — agreed to pay half a million out of your fortune as her price for surrendering the will to *him.*"

The hurrying, emphatic tones ceased, and with the last words the imperious grasp on Irma's wrist relaxed. For an instant two faces, equally white and set, regarded each other silently. Then the girl lifted her hand and pointed to the door.

"Go!" she commanded. "Whether your story be true or not, this house is mine for the present, and there is no place in it for a spy."

He recoiled, as if that outstretched hand had struck him.

"Irma!" he cried. "Do you not understand, — do you not see? It was to save you that I did this thing. Except by such means, how could I have proved to you the unworthiness of the man you have promised to marry? Before God, I repeat, I was not thinking of myself; I was thinking only of you, whom these schemers were bargaining to deceive — to betray into holding what is not your own. There seemed — there was no other way. It was for you I did it."

Not only his words — his voice, his eyes, pleaded passionately for comprehension and forgiveness. But the face which never before had been turned on him save in kindness and gentleness now met his gaze like a tragic mask — beautiful, inexorable, stern as fate.

"If," said Irma," "it has come to this — that what you feel for me drags you down to dishonorable acts — it is time that our paths should part. In any light — for any reason — what you have done is unpardonable. Do not ask me to pardon it, but go!"

He looked at her a moment longer, saw that further appeal would indeed be useless, and, turning, went.

VIII

THE soft spring sunshine had tempted Father Thorne out into his garden. It was not a very extensive garden; but a number of fruit-trees just bursting into blossom, and a few beds and borders filled with violets, crocuses, and hyacinths, made it a pleasant spot; especially on this afternoon, when every breath of air was an invitation of Nature. The priest had been saying his Office as he walked up and down the path which extended through the middle of the ground; but now the breviary was closed, and he was free to bestow his attention on the flowers, of which he was very fond; especially on some Roman hyacinths which were blooming earlier than usual. He was standing before the bed, contemplating these and debating with himself whether or not he should pull some of them, when

the sound of a step on the gravel made him turn, and he saw Miss Darracote advancing toward him.

"Susan told me that I would find you here, Father. I hope I do not disturb you," the young lady said, glancing at the breviary in his hands.

"No I have finished my Office," he replied. "I am now enjoying my flowers. I am sure you have nothing lovelier than these at Argyle."

"I don't know," she said absently. "There are acres of hyacinths — I saw them this morning."

"Great, double, top-heavy things, such as gardeners delight in," he observed, with a sniff of contempt. "I care nothing for them. These are the only hyacinths which possess any beauty or grace. Because they are graceful and because they are Roman they suit *you*," he added with a smile; "so I will give you a few."

He bent over the bed as he spoke; but before he could break any of the flowers, Irma laid her hand on his arm.

"Never mind the hyacinths just now, Father," she said. "I want to ask you a question."

Something in her tone, quiet though it was, made Father Thorne lift himself quickly and look at her. What he saw in her face put all thoughts of double or single hyacinths immediately and entirely out of his mind.

"My child," he said, "what has troubled you?"

"What has troubled me," she answered, "is beyond help. I have not come to talk of myself, but only to ask a question; for I am sure that you will tell me the truth. Father, who is Lily Vidal?"

The unexpectedness of the question startled the

priest. He did not answer for a moment, but stood gazing at her with evident hesitation. Then he said slowly:

"Yesterday I told you that I respected Mr. Wilkins' wishes in refraining from giving any information about the child, to which you replied that you felt no curiosity on the subject and would ask no questions. Yet now —"

"Now I have learned — at least I have been told — something which I did not then suspect," she said, as he paused. "And I must know if it is true. It is clear to me that it is my duty to ask, it is my right to know, who this child is."

"Yes, it is your right to know," the priest agreed, — "that is, it is your right to know the facts in the case. Mr. Wilkins believes that she is the grandchild of the late Mr. Darracote; but the proof of this is insufficient, and Mr. Darracote himself never accepted it."

"Do *you* accept it?" the girl asked. "Do you believe that she is his grandchild?"

Father Thorne spread out his hands deprecatingly.

"I am not a lawyer," he said; "and this is a question for lawyers to settle — a question purely of facts. It is possible that she is really the child of Mr. Darracote's daughter, whose history you probably have heard, but we cannot close our eyes to certain circumstances which seem to throw serious doubt upon the claim. One is that she was never brought forward until after the death of her reputed mother, when the temptation to furnish an heir to a rich, childless man was sufficient to tempt unscrupulous people to fraud. And Mr. Darracote, who

was, I believe, a just as well as a shrewd man, believing that the claim was fraudulent, never recognized it."

"Are you sure of that? Is it not possible that on his death-bed he may have done so?"

"Ah!" Father Thorne ejaculated. "You have heard more than I fancied. Peter Wilkins declares that Mr. Darracote did accept the proof on his death-bed and wished to provide for the child. But we have only Peter Wilkins' word for this; and, while I am sure that he is honest, I am not at all sure that he may not be mistaken; for he has made himself the champion of this claim until he can see nothing, believe nothing, which is opposed to it. At all events, if Mr. Darracote was convinced, and wished to provide for the child, death prevented his doing so."

There was a pause. Irma looked away from the speaker; and as she gazed beyond the enclosure of the flowery little garden, at the distant hills, draped in the delicate mist of spring, and the tender, bending sky, she beheld, with something of a clairvoyant vision, what had truly occurred on that bygone night, — the struggle of the dying man to do justice, the inexorable touch of death overtaking him, and the mingled malice and greed which had frustrated his effort. The pathos of it touched her with a pity so deep, an indignation so strong, that she had no thought to give to the evil and pain which had been also brought upon herself.

The priest meanwhile was watching her closely and a little curiously. He had admired her from the first, and from the first also had recognized the

fine temper of her spirit and the elevation of her mind; but he divined, as others had failed to do, that there were depths in her nature which contained possibilities of surprise, and he felt that he did not know in what manner she would take the revelation which had been made to her and in which so much was involved. Therefore, when presently she turned her eyes again toward him, he was conscious of the thrill of interest with which we await the unexpected. And it was the unexpected which came.

"Mr. Wilkins was not mistaken," she said. "Mr. Darracote not only wished to provide for the child, but there is reason to believe that he did so — that there is a will in existence acknowledging her claim."

"How have you learned this?" the priest asked in astonishment.

"I cannot tell you how I have learned it," she answered slowly. "But there are many things which make me believe it; and if the paper is in existence it will soon be in my possession."

"Then you know where it is?" Father Thorne cried, with deepening astonishment.

"Yes, I know where it is." She paused for an instant, and then went on, answering a further interrogation in his glance: "There is no reason why I should spare one who has acted in the most treacherous manner. Mrs. Treherne has the will. She was alone with Mr. Darracote when he died, and she kept it to serve her own interest."

"I see!" said the priest, drawing a deep breath.

In fact, as if by a flash of intuition, he saw every-

thing. No further explanation was necessary,—except, indeed, of the look of suffering on the girl's face, the white rigidity of her features, the sadness akin to despair in the dark eyes. Was it possible, was it credible, that the threatened loss of her fortune, of the wealth she had seemed to hold so lightly, could affect her like this? If so, Father Thorne felt that he had underrated the possibilities of surprise in her nature. Perhaps it was to satisfy himself on this point that, after a moment, he said:

"Mrs. Treherne's motive for holding the paper is obvious; yet a will made in such a manner is invalid. I am sure of that."

"Are you?" said Irma. "It does not matter in the least. If this child is Mr. Darracote's grandchild, and if he has expressed, however informally, his desire that she shall be his heir, it will be for me to fulfil his wishes. Thank God, I have the power to do so!"

"You must do nothing rash," replied Father Thorne, quickly. "It is necessary to remember that when Mr. Darracote wrote that paper he was not in a condition to exert his faculties of judgment, and we know that he could never have desired that his fortune should be given to one whose claim is based on fraud. Understand that I do not assert that this claim *is* based on fraud. I only remind you that it may be; and therefore you must proceed cautiously, and be guided by the advice of those who know more and are better able to judge of the matter than yourself."

"Where shall I find them?" the girl asked; and in her voice was the same hopeless sadness as in

her eyes. "You forget that I am alone, that there is no one whom I can trust to advise me rightly."

"No one? There is Mr. Kirby, Mr. Darracote's lawyer, friend, executor, — you can surely trust *him*. I am confident that he will advise you honestly and well."

She shook her head.

"He will consider only what is legal," she said. "But there are many claims in life which are not legal and yet are just. It is possible that this is one of them."

Father Thorne hesitated. Another name was on the point of his tongue. Should he utter it? He almost feared to do so, and yet to ignore it would be to recognize what was merely an apprehension, an instinct, on his part.

"Mr. Hastings — " he began, and then stopped abruptly; for the look on the face before him made further speech impossible.

"We need not consider Mr. Hastings," Irma said. "He, too, would regard the claim only in its legal aspect."

There was a silence.

"Something has happened," thought the priest, — "something very serious! And now the question is, how is she to be prevented from doing something very foolish?"

"Well," he resumed presently, "you leave me no alternative but to mention myself. You know that *I* will not regard the matter only in its legal aspect, because I am strictly bound to consider it solely in a moral light. Will you therefore accept me as an adviser?"

"I should be glad to do so," she said, "only — I fear that even you would lean toward what you would conceive to be my side. But it is *not* my side!" she cried, with a sudden note of passion in her voice. "Whoever is my friend will aid me, not only to help the helpless, to do justice, to fulfil the wishes of the dead, but to relieve my own life, my own soul, of the weight and responsibility of wealth, which corrupts every one exposed to its influence."

Father Thorne nodded slightly. It was not because he was assenting to the last proposition, but because he was saying to himself, "Yes, there has been serious trouble!" Aloud he said gravely:

"You are mistaken. Whoever is your friend will aid you to do solely what is right. But this does not mean casting away the wealth which is indeed a great responsibility, and as such to be accounted for to God, unless you are quite sure that you are justified in doing so. And you cannot be sure of this without further proof of the claim you seem so ready to accept."

"But where is such proof to be found? Only tell me, and I will spend any amount of money to obtain it."

"Some one is already spending money for that end," Father Thorne answered. "Whether it is Mr. Kirby or another, I do not know. But you would have heard of this claim some time ago had not Mr. Kirby sent for Peter Wilkins and told him that an agent should go to Australia to gather all the evidence possible regarding the child's parentage, on condition that he carefully refrained from bringing the matter to your notice until everything was

known that could be known about it. Mr. Wilkins bound himself by a promise not to trouble you, and that is why I was unable to tell you who the child was for whom I asked your kindness. I can hardly, however, forgive myself for doing so, if it was the cause — "

"No," Irma interrupted. "Neither your request nor my taking the child to Argyle — for I did take her there this morning — had anything to do with the revelation which came to me so strangely, so suddenly — " She broke off, looked away again for a minute, and then turned her eyes back to him. "But does it not seem as if there were something of fate in it?" she asked. "Can we think it was merely an accident which sent her to Argyle on this day of all days? Was it not as if she were going to take possession of her rightful inheritance? It seemed so to me when I went upstairs and looked at her sleeping in my chamber. I could not think it was chance which had placed her there."

"It was your kindness," said Father Thorne. "The rest was merely coincidence. Don't suffer yourself to attach weight to things altogether accidental. Put sentimental considerations out of the question, and look at the matter — you *must* look at it — from a practical, common-sense point of view. You are in a position of great responsibility; and you know, as I know, that you desire only to fulfil its duties, its obligations to the living and to the dead, with exact conscientiousness. In order to do this you must avoid rash, impulsive action; and " — he spoke with great earnestness — "you must remember that nothing could be more unkind

to this child than to make her fancy herself what perhaps she is not. Take her back to her home, and for the present leave her alone."

"I cannot do that," said Irma; "for when I roused her with the intention of bringing her with me, I found her very unwell, — much more unwell than she was this morning. The excitement and exertion of the day have been too much for her; she is feverish and exhausted. She must stay at Argyle for the present; if there were no question of her being anything beside a sick child, I should say that. But I promise that she shall hear nothing to rouse any hopes, false or otherwise, in her mind. Now I must drive to Woodburn and explain to Mr. Wilkins why I have kept her."

She turned as if to go; then, with a swift movement, faced around again toward the priest.

"Father," she cried appealingly, "pray for me! — pray that this may be true — that the burden may be lifted from me — that I may be set free to go away, far away, and to forget — above all, to forget — "

The priest put out his hand and laid it on hers with a gesture like a benediction. He had not needed this outburst to tell him that he was in the presence of a great suffering.

"My child," he said solemnly, "I shall pray for you with all my heart, but not as you ask. There is but one thing worth praying for in this world, hard as it sometimes seems, and that is that the will of God may be done in and by us."

IX

MRS. TREHERNE had not returned immediately to Argyle after her interview with Hastings. Although triumphant and elated, she was also, she confessed to herself, somewhat shaken in her nerves by that interview, and felt that she would prefer to regain her ordinary composure before meeting Irma. She therefore drove into the city, lunched with a friend, went shopping in the afternoon, with an agreeable sense of security in making large bills, and did not return to Argyle until after Irma had left the house for her visit to Father Thorne. Hearing that Miss Darracote was out, she made no further inquiries; but going directly to her own room, put herself into a *négligé*, bade her maid bring her a cup of tea, and lay down to rest until dinner.

Lulled by pleasant thoughts of old scores paid off, and by dreams of a prosperous future untroubled by any shadow of care, she had fallen asleep when she was roused by a knock at the door. She opened her eyes languidly. Who could be disturbing her? "Come in!" she said, irritably and without stirring. But the next moment she rose to a sitting posture, out of the luxurious nest of cushions where she had been lying. For it was Irma who entered.

This in itself was sufficiently astonishing; for these two, although living under one roof, had never been on terms of the least intimacy. But even more surprising than the visit was the appearance and manner of the girl, who walked across the floor and

stood by the mantelpiece, facing the low couch on the other side of the fireplace, where Mrs. Treherne, in her wrapper of soft crimson silk, sat looking up with an air of amazement.

It was an amazement well justified; for this was a new Irma who confronted her, — not the young heiress shrinking under the burden of her wealth, and regarding with pathetic eyes a bewildering world, to all the conditions and standards of which she was a stranger. This was a woman to whom the end of dreaming had come, who found herself face to face with the relentless realities of life, and whose soul rose up to meet even its greatest tragedy — which is the loss of love and the betrayal of faith — with a strength altogether heroic. For she had, as it were, set her foot upon her heart and bade it lie still, however torn with hopeless anguish it might be, until a duty was done which there was none but her to do.

"Pardon my disturbing you," she said, with cold ceremoniousness. "It is necessary that I shall speak to you without delay, but what I have to say can be said very briefly. I wish you to give me the will which Mr. Darracote wrote just before he died, and which you have kept in your possession ever since."

Her voice was low, clear, and very quiet; but no passion nor violence could have added to the effect of these words. Every vestige of color left Mrs. Treherne's face, and her eyes opened wide and startled. She attempted to speak, but it was necessary for her to make two efforts before she could stammer:

"I don't know what you are talking about!"

"You know perfectly," Irma answered in the same tone. "But, if you would like it made still clearer, I want the paper which you offered to Mr. Hastings this morning."

"Ah!" It was with a cry of rage that the woman sprang to her feet. "So he has broken his word to me and come to *you* to make his bargain! I might have foreseen that he would — the traitor!"

"I have not seen Mr. Hastings," Irma replied, "and I have heard nothing from him. But I know of your offer to him —"

"How do you know?" the other interrupted. "It is absurd to say that you have not learned it from himself, because no one else could tell you — no one!"

"Do not be sure of that," said the girl, gravely. "In order to frustrate wrongdoing, God sometimes permits that there shall be witnesses to our acts of whom we do not dream. You thought you were quite safe in betraying the trust of the dead; but it was a crime too great to be suffered, and so the knowledge of it has come to me. How it has come does not matter. I *know* — that is enough. Now give me the paper."

There was a pause. Had Mrs. Treherne at this moment held a weapon with which she could have struck down the slender, fearless creature, there is little doubt but that she would have used it. She made a step forward, her hands clenched, her eyes blazing.

"You are mad!" she cried. "I have no paper! How dare you insult me with such charges — such demands —"

She stopped suddenly. What was there in those dark eyes which seemed to make assertions useless and violence senseless?

"This is folly," returned Irma, with a strange sternness on her young face. "It is certain that you have the paper, and it is equally certain that you will give it to me; for if I leave this room without it, I shall immediately send for Mr. Kirby. There is proof of your possession of it, and there are means by which you may be forced to surrender it. There are also penalties for theft."

"Theft!" the other gasped furiously.

"Was it anything else?" Irma asked. "Did you not steal the paper from the hand of a dead man, and have you not endeavored to use it to defraud the living and to enrich yourself? You know how such actions as those are characterized. Having been guilty of them, why are you so foolish as to utter vain denials instead of doing at first what you must do at last, — that is, give up what you have no right to hold?"

Her tone, at once imperious and contemptuous, made Mrs. Treherne feel that nothing was to be gained by further denial. There only remained to strike and sting this intolerable being, whom she would have liked to kill, had killing been possible.

"And if I acknowledge my possession of such a paper," she said, "what have you to offer for it? Mr. Hastings, as you may have heard, has offered half a million of your money."

She did not have the gratification of perceiving any sign of flinching under this blow on the pale,

proud face. There are some wounds which only bleed inwardly, but they are the most deadly.

"You know well that I have nothing to offer you," Irma answered. "Why do you waste time and words in this manner?"

"But, whether you have anything to offer or not, you will pay — and pay heavily!" said the other, vindictively. "To lose both your fortune and your lover, — or the man you have fancied to be your lover, — you could not well pay a heavier price for anything than that."

"You are mistaken," returned the girl, with a sudden flash of fire in her eyes. "I could pay a much heavier price. I could sell my honor and my conscience; I could betray both the dead and the living, as you have done." There was a breathless moment of silence, and then she added, with the calmness she had before maintained: "I have no bargain to make with you, and nothing to say to you beyond this, — give me that paper!"

"That you may destroy it, and enjoy your fortune and your lover without paying anything for them?" cried Mrs. Treherne, with a burst of scornful laughter. "Do you think I am deceived by your pretence of despising wealth, your pose of idealism and absurdity? I should be a fool — a greater fool than you have pretended to be — if I should put this paper into your hands without any security as to what you will do with it. No; if I must give it up, it shall be in such a manner that you may bid farewell forever to the Darracote fortune and to Gerard Hastings."

"You could not do me a greater service than to

relieve me of a fortune which has taught me that there is no depth too low for men and women to fall through love of money," Irma answered. She walked across the room and opened a writing-desk. "Sit down here," she said; "put that paper in an envelope, seal and address it to Mr. Kirby. It shall be sent to him at once."

Again there was a pause, in which glance met glance; then Eleanor Treherne, recognizing a stronger will than her own, moved to the desk, sat down, picked up a pen, hesitated an instant, and flung it aside.

"This is madness!" she exclaimed, looking up at the girl who stood beside her. "What secures me against exposure, against whatever legal penalties there may be, if I send the paper to *him?*"

"Nothing secures you," Irma replied. "But if you choose to give the paper to me, I will promise, little as you deserve it, that you shall not be exposed, nor suffer any other penalty than the penalty of your failure."

"Could there be any worse?" asked Mrs. Treherne, bitterly.

She hesitated a moment longer; then, turning, pulled out a drawer, pressed an inner spring, and from a recess hidden within drew forth a paper. Holding it in her hand, she looked up again at Irma.

"You will not probably believe it," she said; "for you are of the class of narrow-minded people who see nothing but wrong-doing outside of the path they have been trained to walk in; but I felt that I had a right to take and to use this. It seemed to have been placed in my hands — I should say by

Providence if I believed in such a thing. For the old man who wrote it had not provided for me, as he could so easily have done. He left millions to strangers who had borne no part whatever in his life; and to me, who had been to him as a daughter, and whom he knew to be in need of means for actual support, he left only a pitiful annuity. I suspected that, even before I knew the contents of his will; and so when chance placed me alone with him, and made me the only witness to *this*" — she struck the paper in her hand, — "I resolved that I would fight for my own interest, that I would force him, even though he were dead, to provide for me; and if not, that his own grandchild should share the poverty to which he condemned me. And do you know *why* he condemned me to it?"

Her strange, vari-colored eyes were gleaming with excitement — or was it with triumph? — as she gazed at the tall, pale girl, who for the first time shrank back a little. For an instinct told her that this woman had power to wound her even more deeply than she had been wounded yet.

"No," she said, "I do not know — and I do not wish to know. These statements have no interest for me."

"But they should have interest for you," Mrs. Treherne rejoined, "because they concern a person in whom you have manifested great interest. Let me tell you, then, that Mr. Darracote would have provided for me liberally had he not known that in such case Gerard Hastings would have married me. Probably you do not know that Gerard Hastings was my lover once? Every one else knows it, however;

and any one of your acquaintances can tell you that it is true. If no one has told you of it before, it was only because your weakness for him was so very apparent from the first. Well, he was in love with me, and I liked him better than I liked or probably ever shall like any other man. But I was not rich, so he went away, and I married Ogden Treherne. I need not dwell on that episode; for the only thing which matters is that when Gerard Hastings grew tired of wandering about the world and came back, he found me a widow, here at Argyle, with an excellent chance of becoming Mr. Darracote's heir. So he resumed his old position with me, and meanwhile also paid court to the old man. I could see that he thought himself very secure in any event, whether I succeeded to the fortune or whether he did. It seemed to rest between us two. No one thought of anybody else; and although I knew that he was selfish and mercenary to the last degree, as his conduct toward me in the past had proved, he held my heart in his hands — and he knew it."

Her voice dropped on the last words, and silence followed. Whatever else was false in her speech, the last assertion to Irma's ears rang true: "He held my heart in his hands — and he knew it." A sense of deadly sickness, physical and mental, seemed to pervade the girl's whole being. She had a vision of depths beyond depths of falsehood and treachery. She did not speak; she only put out one hand and laid it on the desk as if to sustain herself, though her eyes still met undauntedly those other cruel eyes watching her so closely.

"But while we each had our dreams, Mr. Darra-

cote made his plans," Mrs. Treherne went on. "And it was no part of those plans that Gerard Hastings should marry me. He determined instead that he should marry *you*; proposed the matter to him, found that he was willing — what! you don't believe it? Ask Mr. Kirby, and you will find there is a letter in existence addressed to your father setting forth the plan. Mr. Hastings had influence enough to cause that letter to be suppressed, but every one knew that the whole matter was cut and dried before ever you saw the man whom you have foolishly dreamed to be in love with you. Well, you came, and it was evident from the first that he would have no trouble: that he had but to ask and to have. So there only remained for me to make what I could of this" — she glanced again at the paper in her hand. "If you had shown any sense, — if you had possessed any knowledge of the world, — I should have offered it to you. Since I was forced to take it to Gerard Hastings, I was determined he should pay well. For he owes me more — much more — than could be paid even by the half million he agreed to give. Remember that — you who are so full of high-flown sentiment — *he agreed to give it!*"

Irma shivered as, according to old superstition, we shiver when a careless foot passes over the spot of earth which will be our grave. Then she held out her hand.

"If that is the paper," she said, "give it to me and let me go."

But Mrs. Treherne held it as if unable to relinquish what had meant so much to her.

"I would not hesitate to destroy it," she cried passionately, "if it were not that by doing so I should be giving the fortune to you."

"If you destroyed it this moment," Irma replied, "you would not give the fortune to me. I shall not retain it a day longer than is necessary to establish the claim of the true heiress. Perhaps you do not know that she is under this roof at present."

"What! The child —"

"Yes, the child — Lily Vidal, Mr. Darracote's grandchild. I understand now why you laughed when I spoke of bringing her here. It must indeed have seemed to you like a bit of melodrama — her claims, my unconsciousness, your power, as you fancied, to play with us like pawns for your own advantage. But something more than chance has defeated you, — something more than chance brought her into her grandfather's house, and puts into my hands this proof that he acknowledged her."

With the last words she took the paper from Mrs. Treherne's grasp and opened it, — opened to scan with an indescribable sense of pity the almost illegible characters in which Mr. Darracote's dying hand, driven by his imperious will, had striven to express his last wishes. Presently she folded the sheet again very carefully and looked at the woman before her.

"I think," she said quietly, "that you will possibly feel with me that one who could be guilty of such a deed as this — of robbing, suppressing, selling the last effort to do justice of the helpless dead — has no right to remain under the roof of the man whose benefits were so repaid. To-morrow you will

find another home. This, I think, is all that I have to say to you."

She turned and moved away. A moment later the door had closed behind her.

X

AS Irma walked slowly toward her own room, after leaving that of Mrs. Treherne, the sound of her name, unexpectedly spoken, made her start. A servant had approached with noiseless tread over the thick carpet of the corridor, and, when she looked around, said that Mr. Wilkins was below and begged to see her.

She drew a breath, as of one pressed beyond endurance, and stood motionless for a moment. Almost unconsciously, but not the less intensely, she had craved a little solitude, — a little time in which to face the situation that, with every disguise torn from it, had now been presented to her; to decide how best to deal with its practical aspects; and, above all, to gather the forces of her soul to bear the agony of trust betrayed and wasted love, which it involved for herself. But it seemed that she was not to be allowed even this respite from the tense strain in which she had been holding herself ever since Norbert had come to her with his story. She must still *act*, still preserve outward composure, still keep a strong curb on emotion. Not yet was she to be allowed to look her own anguish in the face, to count up all that added bitterness to her desolation. Drawing herself together, therefore,

with an outward gesture expressive of an inward gathering of the spirit's strength, she went downstairs.

So to Peter Wilkins, waiting uneasily in the hall below, there came a vision descending the staircase, which he never forgot, — the vision of a slender, stately girl, with wonderful dark eyes, dilated and glowing with a fire which had not robbed them of their sweetness. To the old man gazing upward this graceful presence brought a suggestion of all things charming and harmonious; even while its pale but noble beauty thrilled him with an indefinable sense of loftiness and purity and — was it pain? As he dimly asked himself the question, Irma reached the last of the broad, shallow steps and advanced toward him, holding out her hand.

"I am glad to meet you, Mr. Wilkins," she said, with an air of gentle dignity. "It would have been well if we had met earlier. Will you come into the library, where we can speak undisturbed?"

"I don't wish to detain you, Miss Darracote," Wilkins replied. "I am sorry that I was not at home when you kindly left a message for me about Lily. I have only called for her."

"I am afraid you think that I have taken a liberty in keeping her," said Irma; "but she seemed so feverish and unwell when I was about to take her home that I thought it better she should remain, and I hoped you would agree with me. I believe that you *will* agree when you see her; for I have had her put to bed — but first I should like a few words with you. Come into the library, if you please."

Her tone made refusal to comply with the request impossible; and so, with evident reluctance, Wilkins followed her into the library. The cause of this reluctance was an uneasy sense that by his presence at Argyle he was violating his agreement with Mr. Kirby, and he desired exceedingly to avoid anything which might lead to a further breaking of his promise. But when they entered the library, the appearance of the room brought to him so vivid a recollection of the manner in which he had been led there by Hastings on the night of Mr. Darracote's death that for a moment he forgot everything else. Pausing, he looked around. It was as if the long interval were effaced; as if he had just arrived to make a last plea, a last appeal for justice; as if the master of all this stately house still lay upstairs gasping away the few hours of life which remained to him. He glanced at the girl, who, turning, faced him in the soft lamplight which filled the apartment. Involuntarily he spoke out his thought.

"The last time that I was here," he said, "was the night Mr. Darracote died."

"Ah!" said Irma, quickly. "Then you can tell me exactly what happened that night. You need not hesitate to do so," she added, seeing the expression of reserve which instantly appeared on his face; "for I have learned all that has unfortunately been concealed from me ever since my arrival here. I know that Lily Vidal is Mr. Darracote's grandchild, and I also know — what you probably do not — that he left a will acknowledging her claim and providing for her."

Peter Wilkins made a step forward, his whole

appearance transfigured, his form quivering with excitement.

"What — what!" he cried, stammering in his agitation. "Do you really mean it? But how have you learned it? — how can it be?"

Irma held out to him the paper she had brought from Mrs. Treherne's room. "Do you know Mr. Darracote's writing?" she asked. "Here is what he wrote just before he died."

Taking the paper from her, Wilkins opened and looked at it with an expression of almost stupefied wonder. In his wildest hopes he had never dreamed of this, — that Mr. Darracote, without waiting for the lawyer, who came too late, had with his own hand attempted to do the justice which was demanded of him. Had he returned from the dead to do that justice in person, the shock of astonishment could hardly have been greater to his old clerk. With hands shaking like aspen leaves, the latter held the paper near the lamp on the massive library table by which they stood, and scrutinized it closely. Then he glanced up at Irma with a look of strangely mingled amazement, exultation, and awe.

"It is his writing," he said. "I would swear to it in any court. He must have written it just after I left him. But — but where has it been all this time?"

"I will tell you presently," Irma said. "Now I should like you to sit down and tell *me* all that you know, — all the events of that night." She herself sat down, as she spoke. "I will not keep you long, but I wish to hear the story from your own lips."

Wilkins regarded her doubtfully for a moment. He did not understand her, any more than he understood by what possible means this undreamed-of document had come into her possession, nor what she meant by showing it to him in this manner. But it did not require any long consideration of the pale, beautiful young face to revive in him the feeling that here was a personality which compelled at once admiration and trust. He obeyed the gesture with which she indicated a chair, and, sitting down, plunged into his story.

Not only the story for which she had asked — that of the night of Mr. Darracote's death — but the longer story of his acquaintance with Lily Vidal, his passionate advocacy of her cause. Beginning with his meeting with the actor, who was her father, and his belief in the man's sincerity, he rehearsed all the attempts that he made, first to convince Mr. Darracote of the child's claim upon him, and then to find the proof to support this claim; leading, finally, to the dramatic moment when, having the long-sought proof in his possession, he hurried to Argyle only to hear that the man he wished to see was dying. And as he talked, Irma sat motionless, one slim hand supporting her cheek, her eyes fastened on his face, listening without a word or sign of interruption. Only when he mentioned Hastings, when he described how but for him he would not have had the opportunity of seeing Mr. Darracote, the straight brows contracted as if in pain above the burning eyes. But she did not speak; and Wilkins, going on, told in detail of the scene in Mr. Darracote's chamber; of the convic-

tion forced at last upon the dying man, of his passionate desire to act upon this conviction; of the messenger sent in haste for his lawyer, and of his (Wilkins') meeting with Mrs. Treherne in the hall.

Here for the first time Irma spoke.

"It is all clear," she said. "When you left her, Mrs. Treherne went to Mr. Darracote's chamber. She was there alone with him when he wrote that will, and the idea occurred to her at once to keep and use it for her own advantage."

"And that was why she did not wish me to see you, — why she sent me away with a lie!" said Wilkins, indignantly. "She had *this* all the time! What a vile, unprincipled woman!"

"I have forced her to give it up," Irma proceeded, "and I intend to place it immediately in the hands of Mr. Kirby. What value it has as a will I do not know, nor does it matter. Mr. Darracote's grandchild is his rightful heir; and I shall resign my claim on the estate, — if indeed, in the face of that paper, I have any."

"You certainly have a claim," said Wilkins, hastily. "You are in possession of the estate under a regularly executed will, while this is an informal, unwitnessed document. The utmost that could be asked of you would be to divide the fortune with Lily — "

Irma looked at him with a faint smile.

"There will be no division," she said, "no weighing of mere technicalities. To me that paper has even more binding force because it *is* informal and unwitnessed. It is an appeal to one's honor, to one's pity — to everything most sacred in human

feeling. And it cannot be recognized and acted upon too soon. Therefore Lily Vidal must remain here, in her grandfather's house, which is her proper home."

"No, no!" Wilkins interrupted. "I cannot permit it, Miss Darracote, — I cannot allow you to act in this manner — without consulting your legal adviser, without consideration — "

"What consideration is needed to see a thing as clear as this?" she demanded. "And as for my legal adviser, — who has, it seems, known all along of the claim and kept the knowledge from me, — I have no advice to ask from him, but only instructions to give. You need say no more, Mr. Wilkins. Nothing would induce me to retain any part of the Darracote fortune, now that I know the truth."

"But it is n't — it is n't either necessary or right!" Wilkins, somewhat to his own surprise, found himself earnestly pleading. "Mr. Kirby will tell you so, I am sure. And there is Mr. Hastings — "

Irma rose. Something in her manner, in the aspect of her face, hushed the words on his lips.

"I do not think," she said, "that we need discuss the matter further. Will you come now and see Lily?"

Wilkins also rose, but before he could speak a servant appeared at the door. Mr. Hastings, he said, wished to see Miss Darracote.

There was a moment's silence. Then Irma looked at the old clerk.

"Will you go up to Lily without me?" she said. "This man will show you her room. I must remain here — to see Mr. Hastings."

XI

IRMA told herself afterward that it was best, perhaps, that this moment of supreme trial had come upon her so suddenly, so unexpectedly, that she had no time to shrink, to dread, to prepare — hardly, it seemed to her, had time to breathe before Hastings was in the room, standing before her, holding her hands, saying eagerly, tenderly:

"What a long day it has seemed without a sight of you! Did you forget that you had an engagement with me this afternoon, that when I came you were gone?"

"Yes — I forgot," she answered.

Her voice had a strange, constrained note in it which struck at once on his ear; and as she drew back, taking her hands gently but decidedly out of his clasp, he knew that something had happened, — that some knowledge had come to her which she did not possess when he saw her last. He had not seen Peter Wilkins, so his thoughts flew to Mrs. Treherne. And yet it was difficult to suspect that Mrs. Treherne could have forgotten her own interest sufficiently to reveal matters which she, above all others, was concerned in guarding carefully.

He had, however, little time for conjecture, since Irma went on speaking immediately. She was anxious to say what must be said before his influence, of which she was intensely conscious, the magnetism of his presence, his voice, his look, could render speech even more difficult.

"I forgot," she repeated, "because I have had much to think of since I made the engagement. For one thing — Lily Vidal has been here to-day."

"Lily Vidal?" he repeated, — for an instant puzzled, because the name was unfamiliar to him. Then he suddenly remembered Mrs. Treherne's words of the morning: "*She will probably have the real heiress there;*" and, remembering, understood what was meant.

"You are speaking," he said, "of the child, Peter Wilkins' grandchild, whom you met at the church door?"

What a flash of fire — indignant, scornful, reproachful all at once — shone upon him from those dark, dilated eyes!

"No," Irma answered, "I am speaking of Mr. Darracote's grandchild, as you know well."

The tone and the glance were even more significant than the words. Hastings was a man whose mind always leaped to a situation, and he comprehended at once that she had learned by some means much, if not all, which he had desired to keep from her.

"Why do you say that?" he asked. "Why should you think that I know well what I do not know?"

"Why do I say that you know it well?" Irma repeated. "Simply because I have proof of your knowledge, and because I, too, share now in this knowledge, which it seems every one except myself has possessed all the time. I have learned not only of the claim made on behalf of this child that she is Mr. Darracote's grandchild, but I have also learned that he acknowledged her on his death-bed.

If you understand this, — I mean the completeness of my knowledge, — you will also understand the uselessness of further equivocation or attempted deception."

The last words stung more deeply than she intended. The blood mounted to Hastings' forehead. He drew himself up with a movement of pride.

"Your language is very clear," he said; "but I do not yet understand what reason you have for believing that I have ever deceived you. When we first talked of this child, I had no more idea than yourself that she had any connection with Mr. Darracote. Afterward I learned of the claim made for her; but this claim, as far as I know, has never been proved, and so I spoke of her as I fancied that you still knew her — as Peter Wilkins' grandchild."

"But why, when you learned of her claim, should you not have told me of it?" Irma asked, with something of sternness in her voice. "Why should I have been kept in ignorance of what so nearly concerned me? Was it not a deception when you asked me to have nothing to do with her, without telling me your reason for asking it? And again, why did you make such a request but because you distrusted me? You feared that I might do something to endanger my possession of the fortune which was to be yours — through me."

Never before had Gerard Hastings felt himself shrink before the gaze of man or woman, but he was conscious of shrinking now under the deep fire of those accusing eyes. It did not help him that his conscience, the easy conscience of a man of the world, supported him in all that he had done. As

by a flash of illumination, he saw his acts, not according to the standards of conventional honor and expediency, but according to those of a nature trained to high beliefs and high purposes; to an exquisite sense alike of honor, equity, and duty. It had been easy to think lightly, with a touch of condescending admiration, of Irma's ideals; but he learned now that these ideals were not mere visionary fancies in the girl's life, but forces which so controlled and dominated it that whoever entered into that life must reckon with them.

It was characteristic of the man, however, that notwithstanding this strange, interior sense of confusion, he bore himself with the composure which with him always increased rather than lessened where other men would have found occasion for loss of self-control.

"You are very severe," he said quietly, "and also unjust, both in what you charge and what you imply against me. Will you let me explain how far and in what manner you misjudge me?"

She clasped her hands.

"If you can do that," she said, — "if you can make me see that I have misjudged you, I shall be more grateful than I have ever been in all my life before."

He laid his hand on hers, with a gentle, compelling pressure.

"Do you think that it has been kind to judge me without first hearing what I had to say?" he asked. "Have I not the right to as much confidence as that from you, — from you who in your thoughts deal so nobly with all the world? Sit down and listen to me."

She sank without another word into the chair from which she had risen before his entrance. And then, for the first time, he saw how white and spent she looked: how unlike the radiant girl from whom he had parted the day before. The last few hours seemed to have done the work of years on the countenance so sensitively formed for joy or pain; and yet her beauty had never touched him so deeply, had never appealed to him so strongly, as when he saw her face now, in relief against the dark background of the chair. Was it that for the first time he recognized something besides its poetic grace and charm, — for the first time saw the *character* which gave it expression and meaning?

He sat down beside her, but did not attempt to touch again the hands now lying, still clasped together, in her lap. An instinct told him that he must once more win her confidence before he could claim even the least of a lover's privileges. And so he told his story. It was a very simple and direct narrative, reminding her in the first place of their meeting in the lane, when he had known no more than herself of any claimant of the Darracote name and fortune; of how by her request he had sought information about Peter Wilkins; how he had gone to Mr. Kirby, and from him learned who and what the child was whom the old clerk was protecting.

"You blame me for not coming to you directly with the information," he added; "but stop a minute and think. What would have been gained by this except to disturb you? We talked the matter over, Mr. Kirby and I, and agreed that it was our duty to

shield you from possibly becoming the victim of imposture. For you must remember that Mr. Darracote had up to the time of his death steadily refused to acknowledge this claim, and that there was no proof of Peter Wilkins' assertion that he finally acknowledged it on his death-bed. By my proposal and at my expense, an agent was despatched to Australia to look up proofs of the child's parentage, in order to settle the matter once for all; and meanwhile Peter Wilkins was prohibited from again approaching or in any manner disturbing you. When we obtained proof, either one way or the other, we intended to lay it before you, and advise you, to the best of our ability, how to act. But meanwhile can you possibly blame us for wishing to shield you from such annoyance as long as possible?"

"Yes," she answered, "I blame you even for that; because, although you might have meant well, you had no right to treat me as if I were a child, incapable of being trusted. But I could easily forgive this, — if it were all."

He looked at her uneasily.

"I do not understand — " he began, when she interrupted him.

"No," she said, "you do not understand — many things. And chiefly you do not understand that I know all — absolutely all, I think — which is to be known of this matter. I know that Peter Wilkins told the truth when he said that Mr. Darracote acknowledged his grandchild before he died. I know that, besides acknowledging, he wrote with his dying hand a will leaving his fortune to her. I know that Mrs. Treherne secreted this will, and I

also know that she offered it to you to-day for a price which you agreed to give."

There was a pause — an awful pause — in which they looked at each other silently. For once in his life Hastings found himself without a word to reply. What could he say? How could he explain the terrible position into which he had been betrayed? For that it was betrayal, that Mrs. Treherne had sacrificed even interest for the sweetness of revenge, he had not a doubt. What a fool he had been to fall into her trap! That was the chief thought in his mind as he sat motionless, gazing at Irma. Then he pulled himself together.

"I perceive," he said, "that you have indeed heard everything; and heard it colored, no doubt, by all that malice could suggest. Well, if you will trust me, if you will believe me, I can explain even this."

"Explain!" the girl cried, and the passionate pain in her voice was indescribable. "Is that all you can do? Explain — that is, excuse, gloss over, turn black into white! And not one word of denial — not one! Only to *explain!* — which means to acknowledge."

He leaned toward her.

"Irma," he said, possessing himself by force of one of her hands, "if I condescended to buy the silence of that woman, it was for your sake — to spare you — "

She interrupted him with a laugh which startled him, it was so unlike any other sound he had ever heard from her lips, — it was so entirely the extreme expression of indignation, contempt, and despair.

"For my sake — to spare me!" she echoed. "Yes, I understand: to save my fortune, this wealth which I have felt to be accursed from the first hour it came to me! It cost me my father then, and now it costs — But no! One cannot lose what one has never possessed. You have loved the Darracote fortune, not me, else you had never stooped to such dishonor to retain it. My God!" — she tore her hand from his grasp and rose again to her feet, a beautiful and splendid vision in her tragic passion, — "that a man should sell his honor and his conscience for a thing so pitiful, so vile, as this dross of earth called money!"

"Irma!" he said again, as, rising also, he faced her with an air of great dignity and self-restraint. "Is it possible that you will not listen to me? Are you going to condemn me without even hearing what I have to say in my own behalf?"

"You have condemned yourself," she answered. "When you acknowledge that you agreed to pay Mrs. Treherne her price for that paper, you leave yourself nothing more to say. Could any man of honor, of the merest worldly honor, have done such a thing?"

"Yes," he answered boldly, "if his object were like mine, to gain the power to do exact justice at last."

"If that were your object, why was it necessary to bargain with this woman to obtain a document which of itself secured that justice?"

"Because I did not believe that it would secure justice," he replied. "In itself, you must understand, this document is informal, and has no legal

"That a man should sell his honor and his conscience . . . ."

value except as a proof that Mr. Darracote accepted the evidence of the child's parentage which Peter Wilkins laid before him in that last interview. But Mr. Darracote was at that time a dying man, and as such incapable of judging of the weight and value of evidence. I am absolutely sure that if he were here to speak he would be the first to advise caution and delay, and that his own hasty act should be set aside until conclusive proof can be obtained whether the child is what he then believed her to be, and not rather what he believed her in his days of health and mental vigor,— simply the tool of imposture."

"But granting that you would have the right to do this, why, then, should you have wished to suppress a paper which you say has no legal value? Why did you not let Mrs. Treherne bring it to me?"

"No doubt she has told you why. It was because I feared that you would act hastily: that you would not listen to reason, that you would insist upon giving up the fortune which you have never valued, but which Mr. Darracote earnestly desired that you should have."

"In order that it might pass to *you!*" she rejoined. "For I have learned this also. I have learned that it was settled between you and him that you should marry the heiress when she came. I am told that there is a letter in Mr. Kirby's hands stating these wishes, a letter which was suppressed, even as you desired to suppress this paper. It was considered better I should not know anything of the arrangement; that I should imagine you loved *me.* Ah, poor, dreaming fool that I have been! How you must have despised me!"

She put her hands to her face in a sudden agony of humiliation, of suffering; then dropped them and drew back quickly, proudly, as he strove to touch her.

"No! — that is all over. We have nothing to do with each other, you and I, after this. Thank God the way has opened for me to drop the wealth which corrupts every one who comes near it! Whether this document is legally valid or not, you are right in thinking that it is valid for me. The Darracote heiress after to-day is no longer Irma Darracote but Lily Vidal. There is nothing to add to that; and, being so, nothing to say between you and me but farewell!"

She had gathered back her self-control as she said these words, and stood before Hastings now, a picture of such proud resolution mingled with pain, of such fair stateliness without a touch of anything that could mar or lower, as he felt he could never forget. And as he looked at her he knew for the first time what she really was to him: not merely a lovely girl, with whom, in banal phrase, he had fallen in love, and whom it was expedient he should marry to secure the greatest degree of pleasure and comfort for them both; but a woman who had power to lift his whole being into a higher region of thought and feeling than he had ever known before. It was suddenly borne to him that if he lost her he should lose the only glimpse, the only opening, fate had ever granted him into a paradise more than earthly, because in it bloomed flowers which were not of earth, and which his world-tired soul desired with a longing of which he was only now conscious.

But he would *not* lose her! Strong, imperious, unaccustomed to defeat, his will rose up in this determination. He suddenly took both her hands in the firm grasp of his own.

"Do you not know," he said, "that this is folly? There can be no parting for you and me. All these things of which you have spoken are of less than no account before the deep fact that we love each other and that we have need of each other. The Darracote fortune has been merely the accident which brought us together, but it is not in the power of any such accident to part us. It is impossible that you can really believe that I have thought of this fortune rather than of yourself. It is impossible that you do not know me better, that you do not know that, putting aside all high sentiment, nothing would induce me to think of marrying a woman whom I did not love. I make no claim of great disinterestedness on this score. It is simply part of the selfishness, the deep-rooted epicureanism, of my character. And Mr. Darracote knew it well, — so well that he only asked me to 'take into consideration' the thought of marrying his heiress; to remember, if I could do so, that it would be what he desired. I promised him to consider his wishes, but I had not really a thought that I should ever fulfil them — until I saw you. And then, to my great surprise, I found a woman who could rouse in me more than a mere languid partiality for her society; who could thrill, who could touch, and who could uplift. For it is there that my chief plea to you comes in. If you tear yourself away from me, you tear away the greatest influence to high and

noble things which has ever entered into my life. To know you is to believe in those things, to be raised into an atmosphere where low aims and sordid motives become impossible — "

She broke in here with a cry, at the same moment wrenching her hands again out of his clasp.

"I have heard all this before," she said, — "heard it, believed it, and thanked God with tears of joy that I could be such an influence to you. Then came the practical proof of my influence, and it is that" — she pointed to the paper lying on the table before them, where Wilkins laid it down. "It is the fact that you have deceived me — oh, yes, tacitly! but it was deception all the same; that, while you talked of my power to uplift, you did not trust me to deal with a simple question of ordinary justice; fearing that I might apply those principles, those standards, which you profess to admire but which you have no desire to see put into practice. And then — then at last the supreme test! 'Low aims and sordid motives' had become impossible to you; and yet what aim could be lower, what motive more sordid, than that which made you enter into a dishonorable traffic with a dishonorable woman, — yield to her demands, descend to her level; promise to reward her with half a million of Mr. Darracote's money for, as far as lay in her power, defrauding his grandchild! Ah! it is worse than useless to say anything more. There are some things which once destroyed can never be rebuilt. A shattered trust is one of them. I know, I have always known, that we are very different, and that the difference lies deep; but I believed that love could build a

bridge across this difference, and that it was not so deep in reality as in appearance. But now I see that it is far deeper than I imagined. I do not wish to judge you, — at least not with harshness, — for I feel, as I never felt before, my ignorance of your world, my inability to comprehend your standards of action. I only know that they can never be mine, nor mine yours in any real sense, and hence that we must part."

"Never!" he said, more than ever determined to bear down her resolution with his own. "Never! for you have not denied, and you cannot deny, that you love me."

"And if I do," she answered, "how does that matter? Do you think I am so poor a creature as to be able to find happiness — to find anything save scourge and torment — in a love without trust? If you do think so, it only proves how little you know me. I am not very old nor very wise, but of this I feel sure: that such a love would drag down the soul instead of raising it; and whatever does not raise us, be it ever so little, toward the higher, the nobler life, must be renounced, though we tear our hearts asunder in the doing of it."

The deep note of passion in her voice made her tones thrill like music on his ear. In all his life he had never been lifted to such a pitch of feeling as possessed him now, as made everything else seem absolutely trivial and unimportant compared to triumphing over the will which she opposed to him.

"And so," he said, "it comes to this: that you are ready to do yourself and me the great injustice of thwarting and denying the love which has trans-

formed and enriched our lives for the sake of a few abstract moralities, with regard to which, possibly, we might not think alike. By Heaven, you shall not do it! Love has the first, the highest right of all — and you shall not deny it!"

His gray eyes, always before so cool and quiet, flashed now a fire into her own before which a weaker woman would have melted, yielded, surrendered her arms to the power he invoked, that great power which from the beginning of all things has dragged men lower and carried them higher than any other influence on God's earth. But this girl, although, as she said, not very old nor yet very wise, was not weak; and some divine instinct told her that if she yielded to the emotion which he roused, to the almost overpowering charm of his voice, his look, his whole personality, she would be yielding to that which could result only in the spirit's degradation. And so, putting out her hands as if to hold him back, she answered:

"I cannot argue with you: I can only tell you what must be. How it is with others I do not know, but with me there is only one love which I can acknowledge and obey, and that is the love which is united with perfect confidence and highest trust. For such a love I could sacrifice anything, — go out gladly into any desert, bear proudly any reproach. But a love of which I should feel distrust and shame, which would be shut out from the higher part of my soul, which could never help toward those things for which we must strive or — or fall — so wretchedly —"

Her voice faltered — broke. She paused, strug-

gling, it seemed, for the power of further speech; then looked at him almost entreatingly.

"Will you not understand? Will you not believe this — and go?" she said. "If I were so weak as to listen to you and try to forget these terrible revelations, I should only be miserable. Nothing else is possible. For us there is no longer any hope of happiness together."

Another man might have taken this as final, but not so Hastings. Defeat in any important matter, and especially where a woman was concerned, had always been unknown to him; and he was not likely to accept it now, when feeling, passion, pride were all excited as never before, — all wrought to the highest possible point of intensity. He had not the least intention of allowing Irma to inflict upon herself and him the pain of separation which she decreed; but he was a man in whom, with all his faults, there was not the faintest element of brutality. He could not therefore disregard the appeal in her eyes, in her voice, in her whole aspect, of physical exhaustion, even more than in her words. His very love for her told him that the strain of this interview must end, and that the sooner it ended the better. He took up his hat, and, holding it in his hand, stood for an instant looking at her.

"Since you wish it," he said, "and since you certainly need rest, I will go. But do not imagine that I accept anything which you have said as final. When you are calmer I will prove to you that you do me injustice on many points. And I will never accept your sentence of banishment. It is much too late for that. There is but one thing stronger

than such love as ours, and that is death. Death alone could force me to give you up. While we live I will never do so. No — do not answer me; there has been enough of this. So good-night, my dearest; and would to God I had the power to give you relief from pain, and to deal with those who have made you suffer in this manner as they deserve!"

A minute later he was gone; and as Irma sank back in the great chair behind her, everything seemed to fade away from her in something closely approaching to unconsciousness.

BOOK V

THE BALANCE IS HELD

I

"I AM afraid, my dear Miss Darracote, that you have made a serious mistake."

It was Dr. Warner who spoke, as he stood by the great fireplace in the Argyle hall and looked at Irma standing beside him. In his glance as well as in his voice there was unmistakable gravity and solicitude.

"Why, doctor?" she asked in a tone of surprise. "Why do you fear that I have made a mistake?"

"Because this child is very ill, and the mistake has been in bringing her here. The sooner, therefore, that she is taken away the better. You must let me make arrangements at once for her removal."

"That is impossible," Irma answered. "I cannot think of her being removed. And why is there any need of such a thing? Argyle is surely large enough to hold without inconvenience one poor, sick child."

"Of the size of Argyle there is no question," the doctor returned. "It is certainly large enough to hold many sick children, if their sickness threatened no one else. But Argyle is not large enough to hold a case of diphtheria with safety to yourself and your household."

Irma looked startled.

"Diphtheria!" she echoed. "But are you certain? Can it be possible? The child has been in feeble health for some time. Why should she suddenly take a disease like this?"

The doctor smiled a superior professional smile.

"It is for that reason she has taken it," he said. "An anæmic subject is particularly likely to take such diseases. Low vitality, thin blood, a reduced state of the whole system, — there you have the condition which invites disease. And there happens to be a good deal of diphtheria in the manufacturing part of Woodburn just now. It is most unfortunate that you should have brought the child here at this time; but there is no doubt that she must be immediately removed, and that *you* must leave Argyle at once, and not return until the house has been thoroughly purified."

Irma did not reply for a moment. She stood in a meditative attitude, gazing into the fire; then she lifted her eyes to the tall man beside her.

"Do you mean that there is serious danger to every one in the house from the presence of this child in it?" she asked.

"I mean exactly that," Dr. Warner answered emphatically. "Diphtheria is one of the most contagious of diseases; and the type prevailing in Woodburn is, I am sorry to say, particularly malignant. I speak plainly, not from any desire to alarm you, but because I wish you to understand the necessity for the immediate removal of the child."

"There can be no question of her removal," Irma said with grave decision. "Lily Vidal is in Argyle

to stay. But I will do everything that I can for the safety of the household. Whoever wishes to leave will be given immediate opportunity to do so, and the child and her attendants can be entirely isolated. I will ask you to send out from the city two nurses to take charge of the case."

Dr. Warner stared with the most open astonishment.

"Is it possible," he said, "that you mean to keep her here, after what I have told you?"

"Yes, I shall keep her here."

"But, good Heavens!" the doctor returned, in a tone of mingled amazement and impatience, "why should you do such a thing? Do you know that you will be risking your own life, unless you leave the house at once —"

"I shall not leave it," Irma interposed calmly. "As far as I am concerned, the danger has been already incurred. To fly from contagion now would, I am sure, be useless. I do not think that I shall take the disease. But that will be as God wills. Meanwhile please understand that the child stays and that I stay also, and make whatever arrangements are necessary for the treatment of the case accordingly."

"But —" Dr. Warner began, when she put out her hand with a gesture which stayed his speech.

"My dear doctor," she said, "protest and argument are useless. The matter is settled. And now tell me, is the child *dangerously* ill at present?"

"Certainly," he answered. "She is dangerously ill, because the disease as developed is of a violent type; but she is not as yet too ill for removal —"

"There is no question of removal," Irma repeated. "I was thinking of — other things."

She seemed still thinking of those things when, after the doctor was gone, irritated and remonstrant to the last, she remained where he had left her, looking with an absent gaze into the fireplace, where a few logs of wood were burning; although the wide hall doors were open to the spring sunshine, and the air was fragrant with the scent of violets, which filled various bowls placed on the different tables. Presently, with an air of bracing herself to an effort, she turned and went toward the music-room, whence proceeded the sound of a high, clear voice singing scales and practising roulades.

As the door opened, Camilla looked around and immediately discontinued her vocal exercises.

"What is the matter?" she asked quickly. "You are as pale as a ghost. Are you ill?"

"No," Irma answered, sitting down in a gilded, festal-looking chair, which seemed to emphasize her pallor and the severity of her black dress; "I am not ill. But — several things have happened, Camilla."

"So I should judge," returned Camilla, promptly. "An air of happenings and mystery has pervaded this house ever since yesterday. I should really like to know what it all means; and especially I should like to know if it is true that Mrs. Treherne is packing her trunks to go away? That is the news my maid brought me this morning."

"It is quite true," Irma answered. "But never mind about Mrs. Treherne. I have something more important to say to you. The doctor has just left.

I sent for him, you know, to see Lily Vidal; and he tells me that she has diphtheria."

"What!" cried Camilla. She sprang from the music-stool on which she had been seated, and stood before her cousin with consternation in every line of her face. "Diphtheria! Oh, how frightful! But of course you will send her away immediately?"

"No," Irma said. "She must stay. I have told the doctor so. She cannot be taken away."

"But why not?" Camilla demanded vehemently. "Why should she not be sent away? Are you going to turn Argyle into a hospital for charity patients?"

"I might do worse, but, as it happens, no one could be farther from a charity patient than Lily Vidal, and no one could have higher rights in this house. She is, in point of fact, its owner."

"Irma! What do you mean? What nonsense is this?"

"It is not nonsense at all, but the truth; although I did not know it myself until yesterday. This child is Mr. Darracote's granddaughter, whom on his death-bed he acknowledged and to whom he left his fortune. It was by a strange chance that I brought her here, not knowing this; but you can see that to send her away now would be impossible, even if I were disposed to do so."

Camilla sank back on the silken cushions of a sofa which stood near, for a moment incapable of speech. Then she gathered breath.

"But it is *impossible!*" she cried. "Things happen so on the stage, but not in real life. How could Mr. Darracote have a granddaughter and nobody

ever hear of her until she is sprung on one like this? It is absurd — unbelievable! You are deceived, Irma! You are too credulous!"

"I may be credulous," Irma replied, "but I am not deceived. There is no doubt of the child's claim, and every one concerned has known of it except myself. There *was* doubt whether or not her grandfather ever acknowledged her, but that doubt has been ended by the production of a paper which he wrote just before he died. And so" — she looked around, smiling faintly — "it has been, you see, merely a fairy-tale, after all, this beauty and luxury and wealth. And my feeling that I should some day wake and find it gone is proved a presentiment."

"I don't believe it!" Camilla repeated passionately, "not one word of it! Somebody has made up the claim — forged the paper, most likely. What does Mr. Hastings think of the story?" she asked, not without a touch of malice.

"It does not matter what any one thinks," Irma answered. "In a case of this kind one must consider only facts. I have sent for Mr. Kirby, to put these facts before him. But meanwhile the most pressing thing is the illness of the child. Dr. Warner tells me that the type of her disease is violent, and there is serious danger of contagion — "

She paused, arrested in her speech by the paleness which suddenly overspread Camilla's face and the look of terror which came into her eyes. Involuntarily, as it appeared, her hand went to her throat.

"I forgot!" she exclaimed. "All this absurdity of her being Mr. Darracote's grandchild put out of

my mind what you said of her having diphtheria — and a violent type, too? *Mon Dieu*, if I should take it! And yet you mean to keep her here?"

"I must," Irma said gravely; "but I came to warn you. I would not have you incur any danger by remaining — "

"But how do you know what danger I have already incurred?" asked Camilla, almost hysterically. "She has been here since yesterday; I sat at lunch with her — and *you*" — she sprang up, and, drawing her skirts about her, ran to the other side of the room — "you have been with her — perhaps you have come from her now! O Irma, I would *never* forgive you if I should take diphtheria and lose my voice!"

"I suppose not," Irma said. "But I hope that nothing so dreadful will happen. You must remember that the disease has only declared itself this morning. As soon as the doctor told me I thought of you, imagining that you would not wish to run any risk — "

"I shall leave instantly!" Camilla cried. "Will you order the carriage? I cannot wait for anything. Celeste must pack the trunks and follow me. Oh, if I were to take diphtheria and lose my voice, I should want to die! Life would not be worth having for a day!"

"I am sure there is no need of such alarm," Irma said anxiously. "You have not come into personal contact with the child; she is now completely isolated, so that you can take time to make your preparations — if you must go. And," she added with a wistful tone in her voice, "I have no doubt that it is best you should go."

"Of course I shall go," Camilla said. She was walking to and fro at the other end of the room, with her hand still on her throat. "Nothing would induce me to remain an hour longer," she went on excitedly. "If you thought at all of *me*, of the terrible danger to my voice, you would not keep this child here. You would send her away at once to some hospital. But since you do not think of me, I must think of myself. My voice is all I have in the world. The mere thought of losing it sets me wild with terror. I was a fool ever to have come here. I might have known that, with your absurd heroics, scruples, ideals, — Heaven only knows what, — you would manage to ruin yourself and injure me in some way which no one could foresee."

"I don't think," Irma said, with a slight catch in her voice, "that I have deserved such reproaches — that I have injured you —"

Camilla paused and faced her dramatically, with the safe width of the room between them.

"Do you consider it no injury to me to take up credulously any absurd story which is brought to you, and throw away your fortune?" she asked. "I am your nearest relative. I have some right to be regarded in the matter. I would be in a charming position, would I not, if I had trusted you when I first came, if I had listened to your generous proposals and cancelled my engagements? But I knew you too well for that: I knew that you could not be depended on. You have always wanted to pose as more elevated and self-sacrificing than the rest of the world; and it seems you are to have the opportunity, the chance to play heroine to your heart's content.

I hope it will amuse you; I hope it will gratify you; and, above all," — her tones grew indescribably bitter, — "I hope that you will discover that I knew a litttle more about Mr. Hastings than you did."

There was a short silence in the great white and gold room, with these two figures, so strangely and strongly contrasted, confronting each other across it. Then Irma, with a great effort at self-control, spoke.

"I am sorry that you believe such things of me," she said. "I have never intended to pose as more elevated and self-sacrificing than others, but only to act according to the standards which were taught me by — one whom I loved and reverenced. As for giving up my fortune, that is not for me to decide. Mr. Darracote had a right to leave his money as he liked, and he did only what was just when he wrote, with his dying hand, that he wished his granddaughter to inherit it. If that paper had been produced immediately, I should never have been here. My inheritance has been a mistake from first to last. If it has raised any expectations in your mind which will be disappointed, I am sorry, but I cannot blame myself. I had no part in the mistake, nor in the discovery of the truth. That I brought Lily Vidal here is true; but her coming was entirely an accident; and the only active part I have taken in the whole matter is in saying now, when she is seriously ill, that she shall not be sent away from the house which in right and justice is her own. To ask that I should do such a thing is to ask too much. If I could do it, I should feel that I deserved the scorn both of God and man."

The musical voice took a deep note of indignation,

mingled with appeal, as it uttered the last words. But the appeal fell unheeded on Camilla's ears. Her anger was too great to allow any generous impulses to make themselves heard. She threw out her hands with a violent gesture.

"Oh, I am sick of heroics!" she cried. "This is what they come to at last — taking up a wretched object of charity, believing some ridiculous trumped-up story, ruining your own life, and giving not a thought to my voice!" (Camilla was altogether unconscious of any anti-climax here; to her mind, disregard of her voice was the most tragic touch of the whole.) "Keep your indigent heiress and nurse her, and pose as a heroine to your heart's content; but don't expect me to stay and share such danger — all for nothing!"

"I don't expect it in the least, nor wish that you should stay," Irma said earnestly. "I could not be so selfish."

"Oh, no! you could not possibly be selfish!" Camilla returned sarcastically. "And yet if there was ever anything more selfish than your conduct towards me, I don't know where one would find it. I have come across the world to see you; but I am to be turned out of Argyle for the sake of this child, and because you must keep up your fine attitude of despising wealth. Some day perhaps you will learn the value of money, and *then* I shall not be sorry for you."

"I think that I have already learned very thoroughly the value of money — I mean the value in which it is held," said Irma, quietly. "I am sure that there can be no further need of any lesson for

me on that point. But when you talk of being 'turned out of Argyle,' Camilla, you must know that you are unjust."

"It does not matter what it is called, that is the fact," said Camilla, changing from heat to iciness of tone and manner. "Of course I cannot risk any danger to my voice; and, since the result of all your fine proposals and professions is to bring me into such danger, I must take care of myself. If you will order the carriage for me, I will go immediately."

It was with a strange expression that Irma regarded her, before answering or stirring. Perhaps she waited for some word of affection, some sign of interest about herself. But if so, she waited in vain. With an air of indignant aloofness, Camilla went up to the piano and began to put her music together; and, after watching her silently for a moment, Irma rose.

"I will order the carriage at once," she said as she left the room.

II

TWO hours later Irma was seated in the library with Mr. Kirby. Besides receiving her summons, the lawyer had seen Hastings, and he had therefore lost no time in presenting himself at Argyle; for to his professional sense it was at once very interesting and very important news which had been conveyed to him from both sources. He sat now with a judicial aspect listening to Irma's relation of the facts as they had come to her knowledge, and glancing at the paper which she had given him.

When she finished speaking he looked up at her, and she was struck with the keenness of his gray-blue eyes under their overhanging eyebrows.

"In order to clear the ground," he said, "I will first answer your reproach that I did not inform you of this claim, but left you to learn it by chance, and, I infer, very unpleasantly. My dear young lady, there was no possible reason why I should have troubled you with such a matter, unless there were active steps taken, threatening your possession of the estate. As Mr. Darracote's executor, I had simply to execute his will. As your friend, I should have acted very unwisely if I had disturbed your mind by a story with which neither you nor I had anything to do. You think that you *had* something to do with it, but there you are mistaken. As the matter stood at that time, — Mr. Darracote having distinctly refused to acknowledge the child, and having set an emphatic seal on his repudiation of her claim by ignoring her in his will, — you not only had no reason to recognize her, but you would have incurred the risk of encouraging imposture by doing so."

"And yet," said Irma, "I understand that you recognized the claim sufficiently to send an agent to Australia to examine the proofs of the child's parentage, and to bind Mr. Wilkins to secrecy as far as I was concerned."

"Again you are mistaken, both in your facts and in your deductions. It was not I who sent the agent to Australia; for I had no right to do so as Mr. Darracote's executor, and no interest in doing so personally. Mr. Hastings sent the agent, — that is, he bore the expense. But in doing this, neither he

nor I considered the claim as anything save a possibility of legal annoyance, which it was desirable to settle in a final sense. For the same reason Wilkins was enjoined from approaching you. There seemed no possible reason why you should be troubled with a matter which lay entirely outside of your concern, but which might have roused some unfounded scruples in your mind."

"In other words, you did not trust me," replied Irma. "You thought me foolish and visionary, and you treated me like a child. Perhaps I should not complain of that. I have been visionary, I see it now very clearly, but I do not think I have ever been unreasonable. If you had told me the facts, I should have been guided by your judgment, as long as there did not seem to be any issue of right and wrong apparent in the matter. But when such an issue arises, one must judge for oneself. There can be no shifting of responsibility then, no laying the burden on the shoulders of another. However young and ignorant one may be, if a point of conscience is involved, one must act, as before God, according to one's conscience."

She spoke with a dignity to which the lawyer could not but yield a certain homage of admiration. Nor could he altogether resist the charm of the beautiful eyes which met his own with a glance so full and clear.

"That is granted," he said; "but no such point of conscience was involved then; nor do I think that it is involved now, although I see that you believe differently."

"I certainly believe that I am conscientiously

bound to carry into effect all that is written there," said Irma, indicating the paper in his hand. "It does not appear to me that the obligation admits of a doubt."

"Nevertheless, let us consider it a little," Mr. Kirby answered quietly. "In the first place, this paper has no value whatever as a legal instrument. Although we may, perhaps, put aside any suspicion of forgery—"

"Forgery!" Irma ejaculated with a start. "But that is impossible!"

"By no means impossible, nor even very improbable," the lawyer observed dryly. "The person who is capable of suppressing and using for her own interest a paper of this kind might readily be supposed capable of forging it. Putting that probability aside, however, and accepting the document as genuine, you must understand that it is entirely informal and absolutely invalid as a will."

"However invalid it may be," Irma said, "it is binding on me as an expression of Mr. Darracote's last wishes."

"I am coming to that as my second point," Mr. Kirby went on. "It was a dying man, with all his faculties, and especially the faculty of judgment obscured, who wrote this paper. It cannot, therefore, be accepted as an expression of his real wishes. I, who knew him well and have no interest to serve in the matter, assure you that there was nothing farther from his wishes than that his wealth should go to reward imposture."

"But there can be no question of imposture. He accepted the proofs of the child's parentage."

"Let me remind you again that he was in no condition to judge such proof. He accepted what he would certainly have rejected had it been brought to him at another time. For the proof is *not* convincing. Of that I have satisfied myself."

"With the proof as proof I have nothing to do," Irma returned. "It is enough for me to know that Mr. Darracote accepted it; and that if time had been given him the paper you hold there would have been drawn and signed in the most formal and valid manner. This being quite certain, what I have to do is to execute his wishes, without regard to whether or not he had good reason for them. They *were* his wishes, and that is enough."

"But you should consider—" began the lawyer, when she interrupted him:

"Will you kindly spare me further discussion? Perhaps I am obstinate, but my mind is quite made up. No argument will induce me to retain Mr. Darracote's fortune. So I must ask you to prepare whatever papers are necessary for transferring everything which I inherited from him to his grandchild, Lily Vidal."

"Nothing could be more quixotic, more foolish, if you will pardon my saying so!" Mr. Kirby exclaimed. "Even if the proof of the child's claim were clear, an equitable division of the fortune would be all that could be asked of you."

"By what possible right should I keep any of Mr. Darracote's money, in the face of that will which gives his estate to another person, whether we call that person his granddaughter or not?" she demanded indignantly.

"But this will is *invalid*," the lawyer repeated.

"What difference does that make?" the girl rejoined. "If we once grant that it is genuine, and even you, it seems, have no doubt of that, how does its mere legal validity matter?"

Her tone had a sharp edge of impatience as she asked the question. It seemed as if the self-control she had maintained up to this point almost failed. But after a momentary pause she went on, more gently:

"I suppose I ought to be grateful for your consideration of what you suppose to be my interest. But if you would only believe that it is not my interest, if you would only put all thought of me aside, I should be glad. For you must understand that I am making no sacrifice. It is no merit of mine that I have not learned to value the fortune which came to me so unexpectedly, which has brought me no good but the reverse, and which I am more than ready to resign. I hope that I should have sufficient simple integrity to give it up no matter what it cost me to do so; but in reality it costs me nothing. I have never taken root here; I have never felt as if this great inheritance was truly mine. It is as if it had been given me only that I might learn some things which were told me but which I hardly understood. I understand them now, and I am glad, honestly glad, to lay down the wealth which has taught me such painful lessons. So don't be sorry for me, and don't try to prevent my doing what, as a plain matter of right and wrong, I have no choice but to do."

"If," said the lawyer, who felt himself much moved,

"I cannot convince you that you take an exaggerated view of the matter, that you are not bound to make such an extreme renunciation —"

"No," she interposed, "you cannot convince me. For this inheritance is either mine or Lily Vidal's — I am speaking of moral, not of legal right; and if it is hers, it is hers completely. I have no right to retain either one dollar or one million dollars. Do, therefore, what I have asked you; and do it quickly, so that my mind may be at rest."

She uttered the last words with an air of earnest entreaty, but Mr. Kirby did not respond immediately. He was, in truth, considering how best to deal with the situation. He recognized clearly that there was no hope of changing or moving her resolution in any degree. Yet to yield, to transfer the magnificent Darracote estate to a child whom he firmly believed to be an instrument of fraud and imposture, was more than he could endure to do. But how to avoid it? If he refused his services, Irma could easily find lawyers to do her bidding; and there was no one with power or influence over her sufficient to control her action. Clearly, the only thing possible was to temporize, to delay, to hope that something, some unforeseen chance, might occur to prevent this act of foolish quixotism.

"If you insist," he said at length, slowly, "I must, although with great reluctance, do what you request; but will you let me advise against haste? I am expecting every day the arrival of the agent who was sent to Australia. At least consent to wait until he comes, in order to hear what report he brings."

Irma frowned with a sense of irritation which she

could not control. The suggestion of delay was intolerable to her. She was consumed with a feverish impatience, a desire to lay down her burden and be free — be free.

"I do not see what there is to wait for," she said. "This agent's report has no interest for me. Can't you comprehend? I am not concerned in finding out who Lily Vidal really is. Whoever she is, Mr. Darracote accepted her as his grandchild and declared that he wished her to inherit his fortune. That is all that concerns me."

"Very well, then," replied Mr. Kirby. "I will proceed, under protest, you understand, to make out the papers. Meanwhile did I understand you to say that the child is here — and ill?"

Irma briefly explained how Lily came to be at Argyle; but when she mentioned the nature of her illness, Mr. Kirby showed great and immediate concern.

"It will never do for you to be exposed to the contagion of such a dangerous disease," he said. "If you will not consent to the removal of the child, you must leave the house yourself. Come away with me. My wife will be delighted to receive you."

"You are very kind," Irma answered gratefully. "But I have already incurred whatever danger of contagion there may be here, and I should not feel it right to carry this danger into your house. That, however, is not my only reason for deciding to stay. I cannot entertain the idea of sending the child away, because I think that her right to be here is better than mine. You do not agree with this, but you must forgive me if I cling to my opinion. And

since she must remain, I wish to remain also, in order to be sure that she has every possible care. I feel that I, who have been holding, however unconsciously, her place for so long, owe as much as this by way of reparation to her."

Mr. Kirby tapped impatiently with his fingers on the table by which he sat.

"All this is overstrained, very much overstrained, sentiment," he said. "If it were true that you have been holding her place, which, I have endeavored to show you, is not the case at all, there would be no reparation due for a mistake which was not your fault, with which, in fact, you had nothing at all to do. And, in deciding to incur the danger of taking this malignant disease, you forget that you owe it to — to those who care for you to preserve your life."

She grew a little paler, but remained quite calm.

"There is no one," she replied, "to whom I owe that duty; no one to whom it matters in the least — I mean in any essential sense — whether I live or die. So I am at liberty to take a risk which another woman might not take; and I beg you to believe" — she looked at him very earnestly and sweetly — "that it is a happiness to me to take it. You have no idea how much pleasure my presence gives this poor child; and I confess that if there were any imperative reason compelling me to leave her, I should feel the necessity very keenly. So don't urge the point any further, dear Mr. Kirby; but accept my thanks for all your kindness, and leave me to do the duty which lies clearly before me, and which I thank God for sending to me at this time."

These simple and sincere words were still sounding in the lawyer's ears when he went out into the spring sunshine. And as he thought of the girl whom he had left alone in the great house, face to face with a danger from which, in this age of cowardice, men and women shrink and fly more than from any other, his heart seemed at the same time to contract with a sense of painful pity and to expand with that strange uplifting which we know when some touch of heroism, coming often whence least expected, makes us feel to what heights even our poor, failing human nature may attain.

"There is not the least hope of moving her," he said to Hastings a little later. "I have never seen any one more resolved. She is a fine creature, but absolutely impracticable."

"The great mistake was in concealing anything from her," answered Hastings, gloomily. "I should have told her about the claim as soon as I learned of it myself."

"Upon my word, I don't see what you would have gained by doing so. She would have insisted on giving up the fortune all the same as soon as this miserable paper came to light."

"The fortune!" Hastings repeated. "I am not thinking of the fortune but of herself. You may find it odd, for I am not a man who has ever pretended to undervalue wealth, but I should be perfectly satisfied for her to give the fortune away to this child, or to any one else, if I could only regain her trust."

Mr. Kirby coughed. This was certainly not a sentiment which he would have expected from a man so keenly alive to the good things of the world as

Gerard Hastings; and while he did not doubt the immediate sincerity, he doubted exceedingly the permanence of the feeling which inspired it.

"It is to be regretted," he said, "that you have lost your influence with her, but I confess that I should not under any circumstances wish to see this splendid fortune thrown away. It will be very difficult to prevent, however, if the child lives. Have you heard, by the by, that she is ill with diphtheria at Argyle?"

"No," Hastings answered in a startled tone. "I knew that she was there — but ill — and with diphtheria! Did you not advise Miss Darracote to send her away?"

"I wasted some breath in that effort; and then urged her, if she would not send the child away, to leave the house herself. She would listen to neither proposal, and, I gather, intends not only to remain but to act as nurse. It is a pity that she should risk her health, and possibly her life, in this manner; but there seems no help for it."

Hastings uttered a passionate exclamation.

"There *must* be help for it!" he said. "It cannot be suffered. Who is with her? One must bring some influence to bear."

"I don't really think that there is any one with her," Mr. Kirby replied. "I understood her to say that both Mrs. Treherne and her cousin, Miss Vincent, had left through fear of contagion. Indeed I know that Mrs. Treherne has gone; for I met her driving out of the gates as I entered them."

Under his breath, Hastings consigned Mrs. Treherne to a fate which need not be specified.

"And I am not surprised at the cousin," he added bitterly. "I knew from the first that she was selfish, and with selfishness goes cowardice."

"After all, one can hardly blame her," Mr. Kirby said philosophically. "She is a singer, is she not? Naturally, in such case, her throat is her first consideration; and why should she risk it for the sake of an inconvenient child, who, besides the enormity of having diphtheria, is about to deprive her cousin of her fortune?"

"Or why should she give a thought to the cousin who is soon to lose the power of bestowing any benefits upon her?" Hastings asked with unabated bitterness. "No," he went on with energy, "we all have been and are alike, — all, in different degrees, have valued her and sought her for her wealth. God knows she does well to cast us contemptuously aside. We have been weighed in the balance and found wanting."

"You take her views too seriously, entirely too seriously," Mr. Kirby protested. "As I have said, she is a noble creature, but absolutely impracticable, with standards which are altogether too high for ordinary human nature. Such people generally end by running their heads against a stone-wall. We must compromise a little, if not with our conscience at least with our ideals, if we want to exist comfortably in this world."

"There is not the faintest doubt that the most of us find no difficulty in making such compromises," Hastings answered. "But Irma Darracote is of a different order. Compromise is an impossibility to her."

"So much the worse for her!" the lawyer returned, with a shrug of his shoulders. "Heaven forbid that I should ever again have to do with a client formed in such heroic mould! When I think of the fate which awaits my poor friend's fortune, should Providence not be good enough to remove that child —"

He broke off, as Hastings rose abruptly to his feet.

"I have just thought that there are two people who have some influence with her," he said. "They are the priest — Father Thorne — and Mrs. Lawton. Between them they may at least persuade her to leave Argyle. I will go to them at once."

"I wish you, and them, all possible success," answered Mr. Kirby. But his tone conveyed the impression that such success, in his opinion, was more than improbable.

III

"I WANT Miss Darracote! Where's Miss Darracote? No, I won't take it for you, — I won't, I say! I want Miss Darracote!"

Such was Lily Vidal's insistent cry as she tossed to and fro in the great carved bedstead where she lay, and turned her face fretfully away from the nurse and the draught which the nurse offered. The latter stood, glass in hand, with the patience which comes of long practice, and tried the effect of gentle remonstrance.

"Miss Darracote has gone to take a little rest," she said. "Don't you know that she must have some

rest? She has been here with you a long time, but when you fell asleep she went to lie down. Surely you would not want her to be disturbed so soon!"

"Yes, I do!" the fretful voice wailed. "She said she would stay with me as long as I was sick; and I am *very* sick and I want her, — I don't want nobody else but her!"

The nurse looked appealingly at Peter Wilkins, who sat by the side of the bed.

"I cannot think of disturbing Miss Darracote," she said. "She is quite worn out and needs rest. Can't you persuade her to take this?"

The old man, looking very white and worn, leaned over toward the child.

"Lily!" he said imploringly, "Lily, you 'll take your medicine, dear! If you won't take it from this lady, you 'll take it from me —"

"No, no!" Lily interrupted. "I want Miss Darracote! She said she would stay with me. Why has she gone away?"

"I have n't gone away, Lily: here I am!" a soft voice replied, unexpectedly, behind the nurse. The next instant Miss Darracote came to the side of the bed, slipped one arm under the child and raised her, while with the other hand she took the glass and held it to the feverish lips. "Now, dear," she said gently, "drink!"

With an upward glance of touching confidence into the face bending over her, the child made an effort to obey, but found herself unable to do so.

"Oh, I can't!" she gasped. "I can't swallow!"

Irma and the nurse looked at each other.

"The throat must be washed out again," the latter

said. "It is a good thing that you have come, Miss Darracote: she will be still for no one else."

This was quite true. Neither for Mr. Wilkins, for doctor, nor for nurse would Lily submit to this distressing operation; but only for Miss Darracote, toward whom she had conceived a sudden, passionate attachment. On Irma, therefore, fell the work of holding the frail form while the throat was washed out; and only her touch could quiet the irritable, excitable child. It was a fight with death which had been going on now for days; and of all concerned in it Irma had most cause to be exhausted, since for her there had been little or no rest. Lily's demand for her was constant, and her only sleep had been snatched during the brief intervals when the child herself slept. And yet, instead of exhaustion, she displayed a strength which surprised every one. It was, in truth, the strength of a mental condition akin to fever in the physical order. To one in this state an engrossing task, a task which will absorb the energies and keep thought at bay, is the greatest blessing which can be granted. Knowing and feeling this, desiring nothing so little as to have time to think or to feel, Irma had spoken sincerest truth when she told Mr. Kirby that she thanked God for the duty which had been placed before her at this time.

It need scarcely be said that there were others beside Hastings who did not consider it a duty; who held, on the contrary, that she was recklessly and uselessly risking her life in these offices of charity. Father Thorne was the first to remonstrate, but he soon held his peace. To him Irma opened her heart; and when he looked into the depth of the anguish

which she revealed to him, he was ready to acknowledge that any means was good which at this juncture offered her absorbing work for hands and brain. Mrs. Lawton was less easily convinced; but even to her, through knowledge of sorrow, wisdom came.

"It is better to leave her alone, to let her do what she will," she said finally to Hastings when they met in the grounds; for, despite Irma's remonstrance, she was staying at Argyle. "One only frets her by remonstrance, and does not influence her in the least. Besides, I can see that it is a distinct comfort to her to have this work to do, to be able to care for the child who she feels has been wronged."

"But not by *her!*" returned Hastings, impatiently. "She cannot think that."

"No, but there is a sense of pity which makes her desire to atone for what was perhaps only the hardship of fate. Only this morning she said to me that Lily had expressed a passionate desire to live at Argyle, and that it will seem hard if she is taken away just when the knowledge has come that Argyle is her own."

"Has Irma given up hope of the child's recovery, then?"

"If Irma has not, the doctor has. When I spoke to him this morning, he told me that there was perhaps one chance in a hundred of recovery, but no more than that."

They walked on in silence for a few minutes; then Hastings said:

"As far as I am concerned, I hope that she will recover."

Mrs. Lawton glanced at him curiously.

"Why do you hope so?" she asked. "It will mean for Irma giving up her fortune; for if this child recovers, nothing can prevent her giving it up."

"Of so much I am sure," he answered. "But if the child dies and she retains the fortune, I can never make good my place with her again. Only if she loses it is there a chance — barely a chance — that she may come to believe in my sincerity once more."

Mrs. Lawton's eyes dwelt on him still, with a not unkindly curiosity.

"I can scarcely believe that it is Gerard Hastings who is talking," she said. "Such humility, such distrust of your own power to make good your place again, and such disinterestedness (for men of the world are not usually disinterested to the point of hoping to lose a fortune), are not what I would ever have expected to find in you. And still less such capacity for that of which the world talks much and knows little — true love!"

"I don't wonder that you are surprised," he returned in a tone of candor. "Honestly, I am surprised at myself. There's nothing more odd" — he spoke meditatively, as they strolled along — "than the manner in which we are now and then revealed to ourselves. I suppose all of us cherish the delusion that we know ourselves, despite the admonitions of ancient and modern philosophy. At least, we imagine that we know the outlines of our characters and of what we are and are not capable. So we go on complacently for half a lifetime perhaps, and then suddenly something occurs, some cataclysm of the moral order, and we find ourselves possessed by

feelings of which a little while before we would have confidently asserted that we were incapable. It may be passionate hate or passionate love; but, whatever it is, it rises up and overwhelms us; and part of ourselves looks on helplessly while the other part is torn and ravaged by forces which seem to have always slumbered in the soul they are now dominating."

What comprehension there was in the clear eyes which met his own! And as Mrs. Lawton smiled a little sadly, what a revelation of character, of fine-tempered sweetness and strength, faithfulness and pathos, manifested itself in her smile.

"Yes," she assented. "There comes a time when we find those things out, to our great surprise. Each of us in turn, — if we are worth anything at all, — and your turn has come, my friend. Well, it is better than to go ignorant to the end, is it not? Whatever takes us from the surface into the depths of our natures, whatever teaches us to *feel*, is good, even though it forces us to suffer. And love — love that tears our very hearts asunder — teaches most of all, since it causes us to suffer most of all. But the teaching makes amends for the suffering. I, who have some right to speak, offer you my testimony for that."

"You are right," he said, — "right and wise, as well as kind. But this which has come to me is a revelation in every sense; for nothing in my life had been a preparation for it, unless it be the fact that I never accepted the travesties for the reality, never believed that the shallow sentiments which masquerade under the name of love were the genuine passion itself. People have called me cynical, and I have been cyni-

cal enough in my opinions of men and women; but never so cynical as not to believe that the great power which lies at the heart of life must exercise a purifying and exalting influence on human character, or else that it is belied and counterfeited. Personally, I never expected to feel this influence, because I never expected to find a woman capable of inspiring it, knowing as I did my own indifference and fastidiousness. Besides, it is the punishment of trifling with emotion that one becomes at last incapable of feeling in any supreme degree. That point I fancied I had reached." He paused and faced round upon her with something almost of triumph in his air. "But I had not reached it," he went on: "I had not lost the capability of passion. I learned that when I met Irma; I learned it still more when I found that I had power to make her love me, and I have learned it most of all since I have lost her. And you are wholly right: even if I have lost her finally, if she never forgives and trusts me again, I shall, nevertheless, feel that I have gained more than I have lost in the knowledge which this love has brought me."

Mrs. Lawton laid her hand on his with a firm, gentle pressure.

"Tell this to Irma when you see her again," she said. "She is wounded deeply now, wounded to the very depths of her soul, by the revelations which have been made to her; above all, by the fact that you entered into a bargain, in her eyes a dishonorable bargain, with that odious woman, Eleanor Treherne—"

"Ah!" he ejaculated. "It is that I can least

forgive myself. It was a terrible blunder — not because there was anything dishonorable in it; for I held then, as I hold now, that I was justified in taking out of her hands, at any cost, a power which she meant to use only for mischief; but because Irma can never understand, and therefore will never pardon it. *Tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner.* If she could only comprehend, if she could only be brought to know that it was my desire to shield and save her — *her*, not her fortune — which made me accede to the woman's terms, she would pardon quickly. But that is what I fear is impossible — to make her comprehend."

"It may be difficult, but it should not be impossible," Clare Lawton answered. "When this crisis is over, when we know whether Lily Vidal is to live or die, then you must see her, try your fate once more, *make* her listen to you. At present she is absorbed in a passion of pain and pity and anxiety; there is no good in trying to see her now. But when all this is over —"

"When it is over I shall be as far from her as ever," Hastings said. "What is weighing upon me is the consciousness of an irremediable loss. I am resolved to do what you advise, to see her, to plead with her, to explain everything, as far as one human being can explain himself to another. But I have a deep sense that all such effort is hopeless, that between us things will never be again as they have been. All my life I have had these instincts, and they have never deceived me."

"They deceive you now, I am sure of that," said Mrs. Lawton, confidently. "Irma is too just, too

generous, not to comprehend; and to comprehend with her will be to pardon. Besides, you forget—*she loves you!*"

"That may be the worst of all," he responded, "if I cannot win her faith again. To a nature like hers, there is no tragedy like the tragedy of a love without faith."

The lady turned upon him impatiently.

"Why are you so determined to look at the matter despondently?" she asked. "When two people love each other, anything, everything is possible. It is only when the great Silence has come between that one knows the real meaning of hopelessness."

"And may not even that come between us?" he asked sharply. "Think of the risk she is running, which I have no power to prevent! I dare not approach her even to remonstrate."

"It would accomplish nothing if you could. Remonstrance has no effect upon her. And the risk will soon be over. One way or another, the end must come quickly now."

"But what will it bring?" he said, with eyes full of anxious gloom. "The danger has already been incurred, and so wantonly, so uselessly!"

Mrs. Lawton shook her head.

"You would not think it useless if you saw them together," she said gently, "if you saw the expression on that child's face as she looks at Irma. It is most wonderful and pathetic. When I watched them I could not but feel that it is a great thing, a thing worth any risk, so to smooth the dark passage for a human soul."

Something in her words, in the picture which they

evoked, seemed to make further speech at once unnecessary and difficult. So, with a promise on her part to let him know immediately anything which might occur, they parted, and Mrs. Lawton slowly retraced her steps toward the house.

As she walked, breathing the soft air full of the subtle sense of awakening life, and with her eyes fastened on a sunset sky flushed with tender, marvellous color, she was conscious of a sense of regret that Irma had refused to leave the sick-room long enough to take at least a little air and exercise. And then, remembering how the child had clung to her, with what wistful eyes and failing speech had implored not to be left, she felt that all the sweetness of the spring landscape, all the beauty of the evening sky, would have appealed in vain to a heart so filled to overflowing with the infinite piteousness of human pain. Hastings' words recurred to her. Had all the suffering, as well as the danger, indeed been incurred "wantonly, uselessly"? Again she shook her head in denial. No. Not only was it, as she had said, well worth the risk to have "so smoothed the dark passage for a human soul," but who knew better than herself what things were learned in such hours and scenes, by such deeds of ministry, such tears as it were of blood? They are not things easy to describe, not things which the world holds in high esteem or of great account; but on them is built everything most noble and most enduring, because most unselfish, in human character. No man or woman goes down into the dark Valley of Pain and emerges from it quite the same; but it is on what is brought forth from that valley — what bitter rebellion against the

unalterable sadness of existence, or what glimpses of the divine wisdom which by its mighty alchemy turns this sadness into resignation if not into joy — that the whole course and meaning of life and of death is determined.

IV

THE gray light of dawn was stealing through closed blinds and curtains into Mrs. Lawton's room when she was waked from uneasy sleep by a touch. It was the lightest, most hesitating touch, but still it waked her immediately; for she was expecting something of the kind, and some sense had remained on sentinel to warn and rouse the others. She sprang up in bed. By her side stood a tall, slender figure, ghostly, almost transparent of aspect, in its wrapper of soft white Indian silk.

"Irma!" she cried quickly. "What is it?"

"Lily has gone!" Irma answered, with a stifled sob in her voice. "Thank God she did not suffer much, but she has gone. I could not keep her — to make her well and fill her life with happiness. God would not let me do it."

"My dear, my dear, God knows best," Mrs. Lawton said, drawing the girl down beside her. "He knows what is good for the child, far better than you do."

"I am sure of that," Irma said. "But just now it seems so hard — so hard! She wanted to live — oh, she wanted to live so much, after I told her that

she should live always with me! And I wanted *her* — I needed her. It seemed as if she had been sent to fill my life with some interest, some affection. Already I had grown fond of her, as one grows fond of that which depends on one, which one has tended, nursed. And now it is all over. She has gone — gone so reluctantly and so far away! Oh!" she cried with a shuddering sigh, "how strange and terrible death is!"

"Very strange, very terrible to those who are left," Mrs. Lawton replied, with all the sadness of poignant memory in her voice; "but to those who go — ah, Irma! I have often thought that perhaps to them it may not be strange or terrible at all. The love which they leave, the love which is the best and most precious thing life has to give, may be but a pale shadow of the great, encompassing Love which awaits and welcomes them. For this child we must feel that it is surely so. You would have done much for her; but, after all, you could not have been sure of making her happy, no one can ever be sure of that where another is concerned. The Love which has taken her suffers from no such incapacity. It *can* make her happy, and we may be sure that it will."

"But she wanted to stay!" Irma repeated. "And it seemed so piteous that she must go just when she could have had all she desired. Oh, I know this is a poor human way of looking at it! — a selfish way, too; for I am thinking also of myself; but just now I cannot feel differently. I cannot rise higher. The sadness of it all is too close, too fresh — "

"I know, I know!" Clare Lawton said tenderly.

And the words were true. She knew well that intense pang of pity which sometimes gives such a keen edge to grief — the "poor human way" of regarding those who are snatched away from all that they held most of value. Were their eyes opened to another value by that strange, mystic touch of death? While we sigh in passionate mourning over their loss of life and all its opportunities for success and happiness, do they feel toward it as a man feels toward the discarded toys of his childhood? We know that this is possible — nay, from the standpoint of faith, far more than possible; but the human memory still dwells with insistent pain on those last heart-breaking glances, words, and tones; still feels, as Irma cried, the sadness too close, too fresh, to be comforted even by divine truths.

Knowing all this as those only know it who have been down in the deep waters of sorrow, Mrs. Lawton made no effort to console a grief which to many would have seemed unreal and fanciful, but which she recognized as most real and most sincere. She only soothed the girl, worn out by watching and pain; put her to bed, saw her at last sink into sleep — that sleep which Nature always sends when some long strain is ended, — and then, rising herself, went with a kind impulse to offer her sympathy to one whom the death of the child had indeed bereaved, — poor Peter Wilkins.

It was several hours after this that Irma, opening her eyes from her deep sleep of exhaustion, found her friend seated beside her, and put out her hand with a grateful gesture.

"How good you are!" she said. "Have I slept long? I have had even in sleep the sense that there was nothing to wake for — no one asking for me. It is strange how one sinks when the need for exertion is over. I do not feel as if I had power to stir, and yet if Lily were waiting for me — " Her eyes filled with tears. "But Lily waits for me no longer."

"Neither for you nor for anybody nor anything else," said Mrs. Lawton, gently. "But you carried her in the arms of your spirit as well as of your body to the very end, — to the gate through which we must all pass alone. She looks like an angel of peacefulness now, as she lies sleeping among flowers. You can do no more for her; so you, too, must lie still and rest."

"No," the girl answered; "I have something to do before I can rest. I must send and ask Mr. Kirby to come to me without delay. I must see him immediately."

"Dear Irma, can you not wait until to-morrow? Do not try to exert yourself to-day: you are not fit to do so."

"Oh, yes, I am fit enough!" replied Irma, raising herself. "And delays are dangerous. I cannot rest — really rest — until my mind is relieved, and it can be relieved only in this way. So ring the bell and send a messenger at once. And then let Suzanne come to me."

So it was that a little later Mr. Kirby was shown into the library, where he had parted with Irma a few days before. He found her there awaiting him, and he was struck at once by the great change in

her appearance since he saw her last, by her pale, wasted, almost shadowy aspect.

"My dear Miss Darracote," he said, taking her hand, "this will never do! It is just as I feared: you have been trying your strength too far. Has Warner seen you? Really, it looks to me as if you need a doctor rather than a lawyer at present."

"The doctor may come later," she answered; "but I need the lawyer now, and I assure you that I am quite strong enough to attend to business. There are some things I want to ask, some points I would like settled." She hesitated a moment, then controlled herself to add quietly: "No doubt you have heard of Lily Vidal's death?"

Mr. Kirby replied that he had heard of it, and discreetly forbore to add that he had received the news with much satisfaction and relief.

"It has occurred to me to wonder," Irma went on, "how this affects my position — I mean as regards the fortune which I should have made over to her had she lived."

"It does not affect your position in the least," the lawyer replied promptly. "How could it do so? The fortune, happily, was not made over to her before her death."

"But if it had been? If I had signed the paper which I asked you to prepare, who would then have been her heir?"

"That is a question," he said, "which I am glad to be spared the necessity of entering upon; knowing, as I do, very little of the family connections of the child who has hap — ahem! — died. We may be satisfied, I think, with the fact that you are the

nearest relative of the late Mr. Darracote and the designated heir of his fortune."

"I am not satisfied with it," said Irma. "On the contrary, I feel that I am in a very difficult position. I don't know whether I can make you see the matter as I see it, but at least I can try. It is this way: in view of that last will of Mr. Darracote, have I any more right to hold his fortune now than I had before Lily Vidal died? In other words, if it rightfully belonged to her when she was living, does it not rightfully belong to her heirs, whoever they may be, since she is dead?"

"*If* it had rightfully belonged to her in the first place, it would undoubtedly belong now to her heirs, whoever, as you say, they may be," the lawyer answered dryly. "But the supposition is not only a large but an untenable one. The Darracote fortune never belonged for an hour, rightfully or otherwise, to Lily Vidal."

"Not legally, I know; but rightfully — yes," said Irma.

"Neither legally nor rightfully. See here, my dear Miss Darracote," — he leaned toward the pale girl with a kindly, paternal air — "you are, I know, afflicted in extreme degree with an unusually sensitive and scrupulous conscience, but you also have a mind which is open to reason. Now let me state this matter to you reasonably. In the first place, as I have told you before, that paper which you persist in calling a will has no legal value whatever; and very little value of any other kind, because the man who wrote it was unable to judge of the proof he accepted. But, granting it a certain value as

an expression of his wishes, we know that nothing could have been more opposed to those wishes than that his wealth should pass away from his name and his blood to a horde of unknown people who have no more claim upon him than — than the Khan of Tartary. Even if Lily Vidal had been really his daughter's child, I should oppose this with all my strength. But since I saw you last, the agent who was sent out to Australia has returned and has brought clear, unmistakable, convincing proof of what Mr. Darracote always believed, that Lily Vidal was *not* his daughter's child. Under these circumstances, we may be sure that he would be the first to thank Heaven for having been unable to render that paper valid which he wrote with his dying hand."

Irma regarded the speaker with a startled expression.

"You have proof that Lily Vidal was not Mr. Darracote's grandchild!" she said. "How can that be? Mr. Wilkins told me that there is positive evidence of her birth."

"Of *her* birth, no. Of the birth of a child to Mr. Darracote's daughter, yes. But that child died. The agent of whom I have spoken found the proof of its death and the place of its burial. Lily Vidal was possibly the child of the actor who produced her — or possibly not. We cannot tell, and it does not matter. All that is certain is that she was not Mr. Darracote's grandchild."

"And therefore — ?"

"Therefore has no possible claim to his fortune, either living or dead."

There was a silence of several moments, during which Irma sat gazing before her, as one hardly able to credit what she had heard.

"You have absolute proof of this?" she asked presently.

Mr. Kirby nodded with an air of great satisfaction.

"Proof which would be accepted as final and conclusive in any court of law," he answered.

The dark eyes turned upon him again, and now there was a very anxious question in their depths.

"Then this great fortune is mine, and no one else has any claim upon it?"

"It is certainly yours, and nobody else in the world has the least claim upon it."

"And — forgive me for asking so many questions, but I must know these things with certainty — if I should die, to whom would it pass?"

"To your relatives, my dear young lady, of course; but let us hope that no such event is likely to occur."

"But I have no Darracote relatives, that I know of," she persisted; "and it does not seem to me that Mr. Darracote would have wished that his fortune should pass to my relatives on my mother's side any more than to Lily Vidal. They certainly were no more connected with him."

"Those are accidents of inheritance," said the lawyer, "which cannot be guarded against by any human foresight; and in attempting to guard against them, testators have sometimes blundered terribly and perpetrated great injustice."

"But it is not necessary to blunder if — if one

tries to do one's best," she said earnestly. "I do not feel that it is right to leave this matter to chance, and so I wish to make a will — to make it at once."

"That is very wise," Mr. Kirby agreed. "A will is what every one who has anything to leave should make as soon as he or she comes of age to do so. I will take your instructions and have the instrument drawn up immediately."

He turned toward the table as he spoke, and took up a pen, but Irma did not speak. Indeed, a silence of such length followed that he looked up at her, surprising an expression of hesitation and indecision on her face.

"I am trying to decide what Mr. Darracote would wish me to do," she said quite simply, meeting his glance. "I have never felt as if this fortune were really mine; and I feel so less than ever since I have, as it were, laid it down and taken it up again. Now I believe there is no doubt that the person Mr. Darracote really wished to inherit it was Mr. Hastings. I have been told that there is a letter in your hands, addressed to my father, expressing his wishes."

"Yes," Mr. Kirby assented with some surprise. "I should apologize, perhaps, for never having given you that letter; but it was a delicate matter — a confidential communication for your father, not intended for your eye. And I was glad to know that what my old friend desired was, without the aid of his appeal, naturally and happily about to take place."

"We will leave that aside," replied Irma, with

cold yet gentle dignity. "I am right, then. The heir Mr. Darracote would have chosen, the heir whom, in fact, he *did* choose by an indirect method, was Mr. Hastings. This, therefore, simplifies what I am to do. I shall leave the fortune to Mr. Hastings; and I wish you to express clearly that I do so because I know that I shall in this way be fulfilling Mr. Darracote's wish."

Mr. Kirby permitted himself no comment, but made a memorandum of the instruction. When he ceased to write, Irma went on:

"I believe that Mr. Darracote left his fortune to my father because there was an old debt of assistance and kindness which he desired to acknowledge and to pay. In consideration of this, I think I may feel myself at liberty to leave a few legacies to my own friends."

The lawyer raised his hands with a gesture which seemed to express a large sense of the hopelessness of driving legal fact into the feminine consciousness.

"You are at liberty to leave the entire fortune absolutely as you please," he said. "You can devise it exactly and entirely as you see fit."

"I will tell you, then, what I wish, and you will help me to put it into the right form," she said. "First, I want a sufficient sum given to my dear old Margherita to ensure her comfort for life. Then I want to leave to my cousin, Camilla Vincent, enough to secure her against the danger of poverty if any accident should befall her voice. She has no right to Mr. Darracote's fortune, but she has a right to as much as this from me. That is all, except a

provision for Mr. Wilkins, and something for Father Thorne, to aid him in his good works."

"I have made a note of the names," observed Mr. Kirby. "Now the amount for each? For Margherita, for example, a sum to produce a yearly income of twelve hundred dollars, perhaps?"

These points were discussed and the different amounts finally settled. Then the lawyer rose, put up his note-book, and shook hands with the girl, who looked at him wistfully and urgently.

"Don't delay, dear Mr. Kirby!" she said. "I shall be very anxious until you send me that will and I sign 'Irminia Darracote' at the foot of it. If I died suddenly and — what is it called?"

"Intestate?"

"Yes, intestate, — injustice would be done. Camilla, and some cousins in Italy whom I do not know, would inherit this fortune, to which none of them have any right at all."

"They would have a legal right," the lawyer was forced to protest, "but otherwise certainly none; and you are quite right to guard against a danger which is, however, I hope, remote — very remote. Now, take care of yourself; see the doctor, and get well and strong again as soon as possible."

"What a wonderful aspect of peace — peace unlike any other — death possesses! What a strange air of dignity, too, as if even the body shares in some subtle way in the new dignity and wisdom of the soul!" Irma said to Mrs. Lawton as they stood together by the side of the couch on which Lily lay, surrounded by lilies, and with tall tapers burning at

her head, looking down on the small countenance, set in the strange stillness, the austere sweetness of death.

"She was never still before, little Lily!" the girl went on, laying her hand gently on the tiny hands crossed over a white crucifix. "A restless, feverish, longing soul was hers, — passionate, eager, but with the capability of loving much. You are right: God has been good in taking her out of a world so full of certain pitfalls and certain misery for such a nature as hers. Yet how I had set my heart on the hope of making her happy, and she on being with me! But things were not as we thought, or at least as I thought. She was not, it seems, Mr. Darracote's grandchild, after all."

"No?" queried Mrs. Lawton, much surprised. "Then she had no claim — "

"To his fortune? None, it appears. It was all a mistake, but a mistake which has worked great changes. The whole face of the world has altered for me because this child came into my life — and the lives of others. It was not her fault; and to me she made amends for any unconscious wrong by the good she brought me, the good of her eager, clinging arms, her demands for service. Ah, how I miss them now! And what a great privilege it is to be *needed*, to render service — "

She broke off, gazing with tear-filled eyes at the serene face among the lilies. And truly her words touched the sharpest pang of bereavement. To have no more service to render! Who has not known the keen anguish of that thought? Clare Lawton put her arm around the slender form.

"Come away, dear!" she said. "Every service which her own mother could have rendered you gave, and now be sure 'it is well with the child.' God has taken her: you can do no more for her, so come! Think of yourself a little. You *must* rest!"

"I need a little rest," Irma admitted. "I am very tired." She bent and kissed the white, waxen brow. "Good-bye, little Lily!" she said. "We had our dreams, you and I; but God knows best. He shatters the dreams that we may awake, perhaps. And if the dreams were sweet, well — who knows? — the awakening may be sweeter."

V

IN that sunny, green-enclosed nook of the Argyle garden where he had first seen Irma, Hastings was sitting, with Rex lying at his feet. Otherwise he was quite alone. All around was stillness, silence, save for the sweet note of a bird now and then, and the many outward signs of Nature's wonderful yearly resurrection, which, under ordinary circumstances, by its appeal to all the springs of physical existence, stirs the blood in the most sluggish veins.

But it was evident that it had no power to stir a single responsive throb in the man who sat motionless, his hat drawn over his brow, his eyes fastened on the vista before him with a gaze which saw nothing of its loveliness of blossom and tender leaf. He had the air of one on whom despair had set its seal, that despair with which the soul finds itself

for the first time face to face with the unalterable and the inevitable.

There is no mistaking the aspect any more than there is a possibility of mistaking this momentous epoch in life. It is an epoch which with some arrives earlier and with others later, but it comes to all at last, and it came to Hastings now. Such sorrows as he had known before had passed lightly over him; had been regarded as clearly in the order of that class of unavoidable events which are accepted with philosophy and resignation. But the sorrow which searches into the very depths of the heart, and against which the whole nature rises in fierce rebellion, only to fall back in dull despair, he had never known before. Face to face with it, and with the deep lessons which it teaches, lessons which must be brought home with a personal touch to each one of us, he was conscious of a sudden changing and shifting of the values of life which could be described only as a transformation. What were all those things which yesterday had been of such importance to him, when to-day the woman whom he loved lay dying and he was powerless to save her?

And while he sat, immobile as a statue in the spring sunshine, with his outward gaze fixed vacantly on the scene before him, his inward gaze beheld another picture, — a lamp-lighted room, a pale girl, whose dark eyes were full of pain, standing in an attitude of renunciation and resistance, and himself saying: "*I will never accept your sentence of banishment. It is much too late for that. There is but one thing stronger than such love as ours, and that is*

death. Death alone could force me to give you up." The words, as they echoed through his brain now, seemed like a direct challenge to the dark Power which had accepted it. For Death was here, standing between them with outstretched hand, forcing even his strong and arrogant will to acknowledge defeat, to accept a sentence of banishment against which protest was vain and revolt worse than futile.

It is in moments such as these that the temper of our souls is known. For grief is the probe of God, and where it enters truth must be revealed. No one is so strong as to be able to play a part under the touch of this penetrating power, or even to sustain certain agreeable self-deceptions of strength or faith or piety. Tried "as by fire" our hearts must be, and nothing is at once more characteristic and more revealing than a man's attitude and bearing under some great and desolating sorrow. Who has not seen the impatient display a strange and touching resignation, and the ordinarily submissive break into wild bitterness and impotent rebellion? Diverse as the natures and the characters of men is the manner in which grief affects them; and what had one whose only support was the broken reed called human philosophy to oppose to it but the recognition of his own powerlessness and the apathy of despair?

Sunk in this apathy, he had not stirred for so long that the dog at his feet had stretched out and gone fast asleep, when suddenly he made a sharp movement and into his eyes there flashed a sudden gleam. Hurrying along the garden path toward him a man's figure suddenly appeared.

It was Norbert; and as he entered the enclosed space where Hastings sat, the latter rose to his feet. So for an instant the two men faced each other, both pale and stern. Then Norbert spoke:

"You know — you have heard? She is dying!"

"Yes, I know," Hastings answered. "But if she is, what right have you to be here?"

"A better right than you," the other returned. "I have known her long, and loved her as long as I have known her. I would have given my heart's blood for her, while *you* — you have broken her heart! Do you think I don't know that? It was I who told her what you are."

"So my suspicion was correct!" said Hastings. "You played the spy in my house and carried the result to her. I hope you are satisfied with your work, for it is because of that she lies dying. It was your story which made her keep and nurse the child from whom she took the disease which is killing her. My God!" — his outward composure shivered into sudden passion, — "if she dies, I do not know how I am to keep from killing you!"

"You could not do me a greater service," Norbert replied. "What do you think life will be worth to me after she has gone out of it? The chances are that I shall kill myself; for my case is far worse than yours. When I told her what I had done, — done to save her from becoming the victim of a fortune-seeker, — she sent me from her presence with words of scorn, which will now be the last I shall ever hear from her. So I, who love her with every fibre of my being, suffer for you, who never loved her at all!"

Hastings looked at him for a moment without answering, a deep sense of the futility of explanation or protestation filling and possessing his mind. What a tragedy of misunderstanding it had been, of presumptuous judgment, and attempts to order and direct events from narrow and selfish motives!

"You have been and you are a fool!" he said at length. "But what does it matter now? No proof of your folly, your presumption, your mistake, can undo your act and restore her to life and health. Between us we have placed her where she is, and it is hard to tell on whom the greater responsibility lies. For you could not have played the spy and carried your story to her had I not given you the story to carry. Therefore we who love her, each to the utmost of his power in his own way, have, between us, broken her heart and killed her." He spoke in a voice passionless as that of a judge delivering sentence; and then, turning, walked away, pacing up and down the garden-path beyond the nook; while Norbert flung himself down on the seat from which he had risen and buried his face in his hands.

So for half an hour they both remained silent, wrapped in the sombre shadow of a grief in which they had a strange sense of fellowship, amid all the soft beauty, the lovely sights and sounds of the spring day. Nor was the silence broken until Hastings suddenly paused in his walk, as again he caught sight of a figure hastening toward him from the house.

This time it was Mrs. Lawton, who extended her hand with a summoning, imperative gesture.

"Come!" she exclaimed breathlessly. "Come — she has asked for you."

He breathed two words — "Thank God!" — and strode off at a pace so rapid that she could not have accompanied him, even if Norbert had not risen quickly and come forward to detain her. His heart was in his throat; he could not articulate, but his passionate, miserable eyes asked the question his lips refused to utter.

"Yes," she said, comprehending him, "she is dying. The last Sacraments have been given, and she may pass away at any moment."

"And she sent for *him?*" It was with a tone of inexpressible bitterness that this question came.

"He has begged to see her for days," Mrs. Lawton answered. "She would not consent as long as there was hope of her recovery, for she feared the danger of contagion; but now there is no hope, so she has consented to see him."

"Perhaps, then, she will consent to see me?" the young man ventured; and the eagerness, the passionate longing of his tone went to Clare Lawton's heart. He caught the expression of her face, and the next instant her hand was in the grasp of both of his. "Oh, Madame," he cried, in the fashion he had learned in France, "take me to her; ask her — oh, beg and pray her to see me! If I cannot see her — if she goes away and I have no word to remember but those last bitter words which she spoke to me, I do not know how I can live. I am certain that I shall kill myself."

"Hush! hush!" Mrs. Lawton said hurriedly. "You do not mean that."

"I do mean it — God knows I mean it! But don't tell her that I said so. It would be like a threat, and I do not wish that she should consent to see me through a threat. Ask her through her kindness, through the memory of our past happy association, of her father's friendship for me, of — of my own love for her if she will suffer you to mention it! Ah, Madame, do this for me and save me from despair!"

The voice, the eyes, the grasp on her hand — it was impossible for Clare Lawton to resist this unveiling of a human soul, flinging itself upon her compassion in all the sharp and urgent tension of its agony. Her own eyes filled — overflowed.

"Come," she said, as she had said to Hastings. "If — if we reach there in time, I am sure that she will see you. But we must hasten."

How they hastened was like a dream afterward to Norbert. Along the garden paths, across the lawn, where Hastings had preceded them, into the house and up the broad staircase they sped. It seemed to the man as if everything in life, and perhaps in death, hung for him on the question, would there be time? He scarcely breathed as he paused at a chamber door, where Mrs. Lawton entered.

She did not close it behind her; and through the partial opening he saw, as a picture, the scene within, of which the principal object was not the bed, — this was out of sight, — but an altar-like table, bearing lighted candles, a tall crucifix, and some vessels of silver and crystal, with Father Thorne in surplice and stole kneeling beside it. Norbert only dimly understood what this meant, what great

mysteries of love and pardoning grace had made a shrine of the chamber of death, but involuntarily he also knelt, and rose to his feet only when Mrs. Lawton reappeared and motioned him to enter.

As he crossed the threshold, his eye fell on that which he sought, the bed where Irma lay. It stood near a window, with a ray of sunlight, like a golden finger, lying across it; while outside a bird poised on a flowering bough which almost brushed the casement. It was only afterward that he was aware of having observed, by the fact of remembering, these things. Now he seemed to see but one thing, — the face he knew and loved so well, with its dark eyes full of the old sweet kindness. He did not even notice that Hastings was on the other side of the bed, and that one of Irma's hands lay in his clasp, as he flung himself on his knees beside her with a gasping cry:

"O Irma! — Irma!"

Her lips moved, and he bent low to catch the barely audible words.

"Forgive" — this was the first — "I am sorry I was — so unkind. Forgive — my harshness — "

"Ah, forgive *me!*" he cried. "It is that I have come to beg. I meant to serve you, but my own selfishness, my own jealousy were at the root of what I did. I know that now. It maddened me — to see you give yourself to one whom I thought unworthy of the gift. And I had loved you so long — so well. But why should I talk of that? You never cared for my love, and now it is all in vain — all lost — "

The broken, gasping sentences ceased as his head went down on the bed beside her. For a minute

there was no sound in the room, save the joyous notes of the bird beyond the window, and the stifled sobs of Margherita. Presently the faint voice spoke again:

"You must not think — I never cared for your love. It has been more faithful — than I deserve. And I am sorry that it has only made you suffer. But no love is lost. It teaches — things we can learn by no other means."

Again a pause, a struggle to hold the waning strength and breath, and then the dark eyes turned toward Hastings.

"*Things we can learn by no other means,*" the weak tones repeated. "But they are worth — all the pain it costs to learn them. I am sure of that. And you must be sure of it, too. Don't let it all be for nothing. Let me feel that I have helped you a little — though it ends so soon —"

"It is not a little you have helped me, my Irma!" he answered passionately. "If I ever do anything in this world high, noble, or unselfish, I shall owe the inspiration and the power to you. But if you could stay — if you could only stay with me!"

"It is better not," she said, with that strange resignation and insight which come with the touch of death. "I am not fit for the burden of life. It is too heavy — too perplexing. I should only blunder — and fail —" Again she paused, then softly added in an accent of ineffable content: "But — something — assures me that when — we have meant well, even if we fail — out of our blunders and our failures light and — peace will come at last."

They came to her almost with those words. The head sank back, the lids fell over the dark eyes; there was a soft sigh, a little shiver — and, so gently they scarcely knew the moment, the spirit slipped away.

No one stirred. Motionless, silent, as if listening for the rustling of angels' wings, they remained, until on the solemn hush the priest's tones arose, saying the *De Profundis* for a departed soul.

300
34 2036

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS
00023194181